

JASYN

AND THE ASTRONAUTS

UNDER THE ICE SKIES

I

GWENHYVER



JASYN

— AND THE —

ASTRONAUTS

UNDER THE ICE SKIES

I

G W E N H Y V E R



CONTENTS

A note from the author

I. THE UNFORGIVING MOUNTAINS

1. Seeing Stars
2. Into the Blizzard
3. The Arrow Wielder
4. The Invisible Beast
5. Dance of the Fireflies
6. Razor Teeth
7. The Creeping Ice
8. Shattered
9. Down the Slopes
10. Algid and Squall
11. Mechanised Monster
12. Chilling Days - Frozen Nights

II. ICE LUMP

13. Chasing Time
14. Ice Lump
15. The Icehouse
16. Home Fires
17. Possible Worlds
18. Filaments
19. A New Frontier
20. Dawn Chorus
21. Shattered
22. Unpredictable Skies

III. THIS HEAT-FORSAKEN PLACE

23. The Trail of Destruction
24. This Heat-Forsaken Place
25. The Frozen Ground
26. Ruins
27. Ice Labyrinth
28. Hail!
29. Thin Ice

30. A Shot in the Dark
31. The Navigator
32. Singing Ice
33. Iolcian Ice
34. The Sharp Horizon
35. An Icy Welcome

IV. THE ICE CITY

36. Kalais and Zetes
37. The Masked Stranger
38. The Skies Above
39. Dangerous Questions
40. The Skeleton Key
41. Electric Skies
42. An Uninvited Dream
43. The Games
44. Uneven Battles
45. Familiar Stranger
46. Jasyn with a Y
47. An Icy Intervention

V. HEAVENS ABOVE AND BELOW!

48. Music of Life
49. Instruments of Death
50. Encore
51. Gone
52. S.O.S.
53. Tunnels
54. Athena Enterprises
55. [C]ARGO
56. Sky Map
57. Rest
58. Galactic Halo
59. Shadows in the Dark
60. Sky Captain
61. One Way

62. [All Aboard](#)

63. [Clear Skies](#)

[Sign up for FREE STUFF and updates!](#)

[Also by Gwenhyver](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

SAPPHIC SWORDS & SORCERY, IN SPACE

If you'd like to hear more about my writing adventures and tales of sapphic swords and sorcery in space (and more!), new release announcements, special offers, behind-the-scenes insights, and bonus materials – including a free e-book of *Theseus and The Sky Labyrinth* (once it's released) – sign up at the end of this book.

In the meantime, it's time to begin the adventure!

*For Jen,
Who makes my world better every day.*

PART I

**THE UNFORGIVING
MOUNTAINS**

SEEING STARS

Caught on an unseen current, shimmering flecks of white puff their way inside the cave. Captivated by their stark contrast to the surrounding dome of darkness, little Jasyn toddles closer to their source, the forbidden gateway to the world outside.

Wisps of snow drift until they kiss her cheeks.

Little Jasyn doesn't appreciate the cave's smooth surface, which offers no risk of falling stalactites. Nor does she appreciate the lack of predators within its walls. She doesn't understand that this shelter has kept her safe. At one and a half sun-orbits old, it is all she has ever known. Though she isn't yet old enough to articulate her feelings, or to navigate without parental support, within these walls she is cocooned and contained.

Beyond the cave, roars ricochet between distant peaks.

She's been told of the unknown creatures roaming in the highest parts of the mountain. Though she's too young to judge such things, it won't be long before she suspects the stories are designed to instil fear and caution. The telling of these tales will only amplify her desire to explore. Because how will she know anything for sure unless she ventures to find out?

Knocking into her surroundings like a precarious ice-raft storming down a boulder-riddled river, she reaches the cave threshold. The fresh air caresses her cheek before curling backwards, as though the weather itself beckons her.

Two steps closer.

She breathes in the revitalising freshness, only for her journey to be stalled by her mother's enveloping arms, stealing her back into the cave's depths.

"It's dangerous out there." Rhea's voice is both authoritative and soothing, but with her adventure thwarted, Jasyn's frustration bubbles over as suddenly as fried-root snow-soup.

Trails of snow at the cave entrance twist into a series of question marks as the weather turns as forbidding as her mood.

When her emotions run riot, as they are prone to do when one has not yet learnt to harness them, Jasyn's parents are always quick to wipe away the tears blemishing the constellation of freckles on little Jasyn's cheeks.

"Come on, my little mountain bear. We must keep you safe." The voice of her mother settles the storm and, outside, the weather-based chaos begins to calm.



Before her parents' eyes, Jasyn grows up faster than a swirling snow-devil. By the time four sun-orbits have passed, and Jasyn is as tall as her mother's hip, they have run out of energy and excuses for keeping her contained.

A new frontier. Finally! Adventure...

When Jasyn first steps beyond the cave threshold, wrapped – on parental demand – in triple her usual layers (topped off with a fraying woollen hat), the cool air embraces her from within. It takes some squinting and blinking to adjust to the comparative brightness of the world outside. The grey-blue amalgamation of rocks is not dissimilar to those of their cave but is all the more curious having never been subject to her explorations.

A sea of silver-white clouds weave around the scribble of near and distant peaks, guiding her gaze up to the vibrant and seemingly endless expanse of sky. With the deepest of breaths,

she drinks in the new horizon. The sense of possibility ignites within her and – as if the sky knows something she doesn’t – at precisely the moment she looks up, the clouds part and unleash a burst of sunshine.



Led by their trusty claw-goat, Snowdrop, Rhea navigates the jagged mountain fields. As instructed, Jasyn follows close, copying her mother step for step. On this, her first miniature adventure, she discovers the ice-frosted hilltops are not as barren as they appear.

If you know where to look.

When Snowdrop digs at the snow, they are rewarded with roots and berries. For other discoveries, Rhea uses the Shard. As the name suggests, the device looks to be a flat chunk of broken ice, but for the web of luminous components within. When touched to the plant in question, a list of its qualities illuminates across its surface, along with its uses and – crucially – whether it is edible.

As sunshine follows them, Rhea comments on how “unusual” and “irregular” the weather is today. But Jasyn gives no weight to such observations, focusing instead on the unfamiliar contours of her new surroundings.

If her parents had intended to dampen her enthusiasm for the outside world by keeping her hidden away, they have magnificently failed. In their efforts to keep her contained, they have ensured her gaze will never stray far from the horizon, or above it. They have only succeeded in making Jasyn’s exploration of the world beyond the cave, and this intriguing ever-shifting expanse known as *sky*, a necessity.

By late afternoon, they return with roots and shoots, berries and bulbs. “Much more than usual,” Rhea notes, rushing into the cave on a mission to show off their gatherings to Jasyn’s father, Chiron.

With the daylight descending beyond the prickle of mountaintops, Jasyn’s gaze returns skywards. It doesn’t so

much steal her breath as whisk it away.

“Night and temperature are falling, Jasyn,” says Rhea. In other words, *get inside*.

So taken is Jasyn with the changing hues, the deep indigo dappled with twinkles called stars (like the cave’s glow-worms, only with a sense of infinity about them), heeding her parents’ pleas becomes more impossible than the beauty of the skies.

“What are they?” asks Jasyn, as Rhea returns to retrieve her.

Perhaps not wanting to spoil a perfect day, and Jasyn’s emotional equilibrium, Rhea indulges her curiosity and looks upwards with her.

“Most of the dots are stars. Some are planets: worlds that are far away. Can you see the shapes? Formed in the space between the stars? That cluster there... that’s known as the Leaping Lion.”

Jasyn’s gaze flits from one star to the next, skating across the night sky, tying it in knots. So many possibilities, she can’t settle on just one.

“What’s a lion?” she asks, squinting at the sky.

“A creature that used to roam the plains of Iolcus, before the ice came.”

“Didn’t it get lonely?”

“No, silly. It had other lion friends.” A flicker of sadness crosses Rhea’s face, but before it can resonate with Jasyn, she points elsewhere in the sky. “That cluster, between the far-left peaks, that’s the Snow Tiger. Tigers used to live in jungles.”

“What’s jungles?”

“So many questions, Jasyn,” says Rhea with a chuckle and a rare, indulgent smile. “Oh, and that one, right above us, can you see the claws, the nose, the tail?”

Somehow, the dots known as stars glisten a little brighter in their formation. Jasyn joins up the winking sky-dots in her

mind to form the hulking shape of a creature on its hind legs, roaring down at the world.

“That’s the Mountain Bear,” says Rhea, nuzzling into Jasyn’s cheek and making them both smile.

“Why are they in the sky?”

“That’s where stars and planets belong. On some of those dots, there are other people, other creatures, looking up at us. To them, our world is only a dot in their sky.”

Jasyn’s mind opens as wide as her dropped jaw, as if she’s been woken by a snowball puffing into powder as it hits her in the face.

“The sky shapes are constellations. Named after myths and objects, and creatures that once roamed this world, but are now extinct or in eternal hibernation.”

Jasyn wants to question the difference between ‘extinct’ and ‘eternal hibernation’, but the starburst of possibilities in her mind renders her speechless. The day had started with exploring new frontiers of her world, and has ended with finding out there are hundreds, maybe even thousands of other worlds, each with their own frontiers, out there. *Up there.*

“If you’re lost at night, the stars will help you find your way. You see that star, the eye of the Mountain Bear?”

The one star that blinks brighter than the rest.

“It is known as the Astro-pyxis. It remains steady, fixed in the sky. You can use it to navigate.”

The only response Jasyn can manage is to keep staring in wonder, mouth half-open.

“The temperature is dropping. Come on, my little snow tiger, we must take shelter.”

“I thought I was a mountain bear?” says Jasyn, more to herself and the sky than her mother, who has headed back in, obviously under the impression Jasyn is following.

The stars. *How can they look so impossibly far away, but also seem within reach?*

With little first-hand experience of depth and perspective, hoping she might touch them, discover their weight, their texture, Jasyn extends her arm and is disappointed that, unlike the glow-worms of the cave, these lights cannot be reached.

Or perhaps she just needs to get a little closer.

As she edges forward, she grasps as far out and up as she can. The beauty of the sky steals her breath. She takes a step too far. The ground disappears beneath her. A rapid rush of cool air shears her cheeks.

A flat rock interrupts her fall, and a lightning lash of pain rips through her and the skies.



An electric ice-storm bites at the cave's entrance as Rhea cradles Jasyn onto the rock that ordinarily acts as their dinner table.

"She must have lost her footing." Rhea curses herself. "I only turned away for a second."

Furrowing his brow, Chiron checks Jasyn over. Though her mother and father narrate their discoveries of no scrapes (thanks to Jasyn being almost entirely swaddled in layers), and no broken bones, her insides feel dented and shaken.

The storm rages inside and out.

A strange breeze whispers around Jasyn. *Is it a song?* Lyrical, sweet and full of warning.

"Shh, shh. My little mountain bear. We've got you." Chiron's words do little to calm her, with sharp hail hammering at the threshold and her head pounding the beat of a thousand drums.

The confusing whisper-song adds to the sensory chaos.

"Let me tell you the story of a land, far from this darkness..." That is how it begins. That is how her mother's story of the skies always begins. Her voice deep and soothing,

she traces the well-worn tracks of a story Jasyn has heard a thousand times. One she would welcome a thousand more.

Both Jasyn and the whisper-song exhale their relief.

Chin quivering, Jasyn stares up at the blue-black dome of rock where the glow-worms offer cool blue blips. She imagines them to be stars. Her sobs quieten. What would it feel like to claw through the rock, to climb up into the sky, to find her way to each of the stars? *What would she find?*

“Legend tells of a magical land. Plentiful and golden...”

The drumming at the door slows to a sedate rhythm. The breeze within the cave unwinds. The whispering song ceases. Even Snowdrop settles in her rounded corner for the telling.

“The Golden Land. Like Iolcus, it, too, was once scarred, barren and broken.” A sadness fills her mother’s voice, but Jasyn knows the next sentence will wash that all away. “And then, one day...”

Jasyn’s frown tugs into a smile at the shadow-shapes formed in the firelight licking the wall. Chiron perfected the art of shadow stories many sun-orbits ago.

“...a saviour descended from the heavens. Dazzling. Golden. The offspring of the Seven Suns and skies.”

The shadow-shapes depict a four-legged creature with two horns, not unlike Snowdrop the claw-goat, only with a flourish of flapping wings.

“Their Golden Fleece breathed life into the lands...”

A puff from Chiron sends embers, sparks of gold and amber, into the air, swirling about the story stage.

“...and in this golden land there was no need for hope or fear,” continues Rhea, nearing the end of the tale. “For life was as they wished it to be.”

The gusts beyond the cave calm to a purr as, cocooned by the tales of saviours and space, Jasyn drifts into a deep sleep, filled with dreams of skies and adventures.



Despite her unfortunate lesson in the unreachable distance of stars and the bone-shuddering cruelty of gravity, young Jasyn's enthusiasm for the world outside only grows. While her parents are not happy for her to roam, there is little they can do to stop her. They insist upon two rules: one, do not trespass the higher plains, and two, always be back by nightfall.

With her limited freedom at the mercy of her reclusive parents, Jasyn has so far kept to the rules. That doesn't mean boundaries aren't to be pushed. As she climbs in search of new heights, she is far too preoccupied to consider that she's not cut from the same cloth as them. Where her parents hunker down in the safety of their cave and travel the same path each day in search of food, young Jasyn is only too keen to explore the jagged hilltops and climb rock faces in search of new discoveries.

Even visually her parents' dark hair puts them at odds with their surroundings. Whether they are backed by a patch of frosted rocks or ice crystals, they stick out more than a couple of stalagmites in an open plain. Whereas Jasyn, with her hair the colour of blemished snow, could conceivably be overlooked by hunting eyes.

Stones of interesting shapes and tracks left by hidden creatures capture Jasyn's attention daily. The stones, she collects and lines up in the nook within her sleeping alcove. The tracks, she imagines what they belong to, what the creatures might look like, and where they might live. Like her parents, the unseen creatures seem to think staying hidden is the way to survive.

Four further sun-orbits pass with the family in their hilltop den, with Jasyn roaming the mountaintops without incident or encounter, and in this time, they have no idea they are not the only ones making their home in the hills.

They have no idea they are being watched.

INTO THE BLIZZARD

Z
Z Z

Your makeshift ice-raft is jagged and uncomfortable.

By luck or design, you avoid the razor teeth of stalactites and stalagmites, puncturing the surface of the thunderous water as you pinball down a dark and narrow tunnel.

Bleak darkness opens to star dappled night. Ice air blankets around you.

Your surroundings are a blur. Though your eyes cannot decipher depth, the sharpness of the surroundings is not lost on you as a giant jagged crown looms over the landscape.

The gradient of the river slope increases, as does the speed of your journey down it.

A boulder blocks your path. Water rushes, pinning you in place. Pressure builds, threatening the integrity of your vessel.

The obstacle allows you to linger long enough to observe the overbearing flat rectangular surface. It frames a silhouette. You think it a mighty soaring bird, pointed skyward, aimed at spheres and twinkling dots. The person before it impresses in a uniform of grey, white and blue, quite unlike the rags you wear. Their breast pocket is emblazoned with an insignia you cannot understand. Hands on hips, their determined gaze always upward, they are mighty, unflinching.

A god of the skies.

Across all of this: shapes that are probably words. But you don't know this language yet, so their meaning slips past you

as the surging river shoves you back into its flow.

As you pass under a bridge, you lose the lanterns of stars. A monstrous roar of footsteps from above echoes in the under-bridge cavity. When you emerge on the other side, a dazzling light with deadly intent swoops past and you wonder – as you wake yourself from this confusing and returning dream – where in Iolcus and the heavens these images have come from.



“Have we always lived in the mountains?” asks Jasyn. Her question is greeted by slowed chewing and momentary silence.

“Eat your breakfast, Jasyn. It’s getting cold,” says Rhea.

The skies outside grumble and churn. The turbulent weather is so commonplace, the correlation between the skies and Jasyn’s storming feelings is – to her – as murky as the weather. At eight sun-orbits old, she hates it when her questions go unanswered. She hates it when her mother turns stern. Especially when she doesn’t know why.

“We live in the Unforgiving Mountains, of course it’s getting cold,” says Jasyn, trying to chase away her own annoyance with a cheeky smile. Chiron’s chuckle cracks through the tension, soon followed by Rhea’s smirk.

As soon as she’d learned to weave sentences together, she’d asked about aspects of her repeating dream, always with the same frosty response. The conversation tends to end with her mother or father declaring: “That’s enough, Jasyn. It was just a dream.”

If Jasyn were to think about it – which now and then she does – questions like “Are there other people?” and “What is there beyond the mountains?”, which should have quantifiable answers, are always left to silence.

There are so many unanswered questions in Jasyn’s mind. Her lack of knowledge of what lies beyond the cave and these mountains make her a stranger in her own world.

“There’s nothing for us out there,” is the most frustrating of responses, both telling her nothing and putting an end to any further questioning. Though not an end to her curiosity.

From listening to her parents’ conversations when they think she’s asleep, she’s managed to glean a few nuggets of information about this place they call ‘home’. First – no one else is stupid enough to exist here. Second – that has to do with ‘formidable carnivores’ that retreated to the peaks during the Great Freeze. Third – whoever decided to name the time when things got markedly colder didn’t have much of an imagination, but perhaps did have a sense of irony as there is arguably nothing *great* about it.

Jasyn has never seen any such ‘carnivores’. Any tracks she’s discovered have belonged to creatures notably smaller than her. And the fact that they scurry into hiding on any occasion Jasyn seeks them out would suggest there is nothing ‘formidable’ about them.

On this topic, too, her parents have no answers. Only that the three of them have to be careful and stick to what they know. Which, Jasyn would argue, isn’t much.

She might be only eight sun-orbits old, but she’s starting to suspect their limited freedom is a prison created of unwarranted fears. And, left with more questions than answers, she is fast learning that if she wants to find out about anything, she’ll need to seek the knowledge herself.



“The Ice King is angry,” her mother says as the bitter chill creeps its way inside. It’s a phrase her parents have uttered more and more as winter nooses around them. Even the foraged roots wither as they pluck them from the ground now.

The Ice King is angry.

Given her parents’ enthusiasm for evading questions, Jasyn hasn’t managed to decipher if there is – or was – an Ice King, or if it’s one of those odd figures of speech. She’d looked it up on the Shard but found nothing. But questions like

these fade into insignificance when it's not only the foraged roots withering, but her parents, too.

Cool glow-worm light casts angular shadows on their hollowed, sweat-soaked faces. Clammy moisture crowds her parents' brows as they seem to require simultaneous cooling and warming. An impossible task, if ever there was one.

"We need fever root," Rhea, the stronger of the two, mumbles as she attempts to wrap up in her outdoor layers only to crumble against the cave wall instead. "We will perish if we do not."

"Perish?" asks Jasyn.

"Death." Rhea wheezes between laboured breaths as she attempts to stand straight.

Jasyn steps in to support her, but the weight on her shoulders is too much and she manages only to lower her to the ground.

"What's death?"

"It's..." (*wheeze*) "...eternal hibernation..." (*rasp*) "...when you sleep but never wake." Rhea stares at the entrance to their cave as if it were an impossible distance. "You become the stars."

Eternal hibernation? Become the stars? Jasyn's not sure whether death sounds restful or like a great adventure. But given her mother's resistance, Jasyn must be missing something.

So, she looks it up.

According to the knowledge banks of the Shard, DEATH is a large topic, complicated enough to have a dozen subheadings and conflicting 'understandings'. The mechanics of death send chills through her. For a moment, everything in her body feels wrong – breathing that had felt natural now stutters, and her heartbeat seems all out of step – as if questioning how it works might stop it from doing so.

But now isn't the time for getting distracted.

She scrolls past the mechanics to the concepts around it. Her eyes flit over each piece of information. According to the Shard, it's a journey from which few have returned. Some say it's not a journey at all, but an end to the only journey a living creature gets. According to some, 'death' is *the end*, and *a beginning* according to others. There are some who think you become part of the sky, others; the ground. Some say you become part of something bigger. But there are others who think you turn to nothing, as if you never were.

That freezes her insides so much she fears she might crack.

Nothing. Never were. That doesn't sound like much of an adventure, does it?

Sickness churns Jasyn's stomach, tightening her muscles, burning her throat as, for the first time in her life, it resonates that life and luck can run out.

In sympathy with her turmoil, the wind howls outside.

Death, never waking, eternal hibernation... whatever it's called, Jasyn refuses to let it take them. Her mother is in no condition to brave the tumultuous weather. The squall ups its roars several notches in agreement.

Jasyn's inner blizzard crowds her thoughts.

"Be calm, Jasyn. Be calm." Her mother's breaths rasp, echoed by her father's unconscious struggles, inviting a glimpse of clarity:

Their lives will be forever changed if she doesn't act. The certainty grips its icy talons about her neck.

"I'll go."

With shaking hands, she throws on her layers in a numb trance. She claims the Shard and a pocketknife from the table-rock. She expects her mother to tell her off for taking the Shard, or that she's to be careful with it, at least. She expects a list of the thousand reasons she shouldn't go: it's too cold, she's too young, it's too late in the day, there's a storm, it's too dangerous. Okay, five reasons. But they'd been enough individually to block her path a thousand times before.

The lack of protest is more chilling than the storm outside.

“The Ice King is angry... the Ice King is angry...” is all Rhea mutters.

Fear sickens Jasyn, but she pushes it down. *She’s eight sun-orbits old. She can do this.*

“Be back before nightfall.” Jasyn mutters her parents’ usual warning to herself as she stumbles out into the blizzard.



According to the Shard, the plant she needs is a navy petalled flower with a grey-green stalk:

FEVER ROOT

(MEDICINAL)

Treats underlying cause of mountain fever. Found in sheltered areas of frozen climates.

But which way to turn? She doesn’t recall ever seeing a flower of that description.

On instinct, she opts for the direction that promises to position her closer to the sky. The lower slopes are clogged with poison, anyway. (Though what this poison is, Jasyn’s parents have never specified.)

Despite her shaking hands and quaking legs, fingertips and toes find the best route upwards. The knifing wind cuts at her cheeks. Whips of white-ribbon hair trailing from under her woollen hat thrash her eyes.

“*Watch where you’re going,*” scolds her mother’s voice in her mind.

She slips, dropping the short distance she’s managed with an ungraceful thud. Whether it hurts or not, she refuses to register.

Even without the smothering blizzard, the location she seeks would not be easy to reach. With it, it verges on impossible. The added obstacle of vision-obscuring hair is a challenge too far, but one she can solve, at least.

Without ceremony, she retrieves the pocketknife, ordinarily used for slicing roots and other nutritious discoveries, and hacks away her hair, ruffling its shortness to ensure it won't interrupt her view.

"Be more careful," warns the imagined voice of Jasyn's father.

Hindered now only by gravity, the weather, her vibrating limbs and churning gut, Jasyn returns to her climb. Each vertical she conquers is without reward. At each sheltered plateau, she digs into the drifted snow until her fingers, even gloved, grow numb. She knows not to climb in these conditions, and never with icy hands, but there's no time for caution.

Her trousers catch on a sharp ledge, but she manages to unhook the material without event.

"Don't snag your clothes," warns her mother's voice. With Jasyn's clothes being a truncated version of her parents' old garments, to be added to as she grows, the importance of not ruining what little fabric they have has been drummed into her. She's been told off before. She hopes her parents will soon be able to tell her off again.

The wind howls as her desperation grows. If she doesn't return soon, her home will become what the Shard had called 'a tomb'. Panic seeps and settles as a deep freeze in the marrow of her bones, rooting her to the spot. White-out obscures everything.

Which way to turn?

Peering down sheds no light on how far she's climbed. The next ledge could be a handful of reaches away. Or it could be too many. Upward glances give no clue. Only gravity suggests which way is up and which way she would fall should she lose hold.

Get a grip.

Like Snowdrop the claw-goat shaking her fur free of thickening snow, Jasyn shudders the hesitancy from herself. Choosing a direction is better than standing still. Doing something is better than nothing. When her outreached arm finds a cliff face, *a grip* is precisely what she gets.

She climbs until her numbed fingers slip.

The air snaps at her as she falls.

As her arms flail and her hands paddle the air, she doesn't think about how much the landing will hurt; she only chokes on the idea that this means the end for them all.

Still falling...

She must have climbed higher than she thought. She doesn't know how, or if there is a why, but the air thickens. The moisture fluffs into snow, the frozen air gravitating to her, slowing her descent, if only a little.

For the first time, Jasyn questions whether the skies are at her mercy, or if she is at the mercy of the skies.

Her body meets the snow with an unforgiving *crunch*, jolting the air from her lungs in a plume. The immediate throbbing at the back of her head trickles forwards, shrouding her vision in shadow. Only in the half-moment before the curtains of her vision close does she register the oddly pointed shape of a figure roaming through the blizzard towards her.

THE ARROW WIELDER

Vision returns in tandem with a brain-hammering headache. Despite the pointy end of an arrow aiming at her, Jasyn's attention fixes on the galaxy of colours bursting within the piercing eyes beyond.

Long eyelashes blink away the sleet.

Perhaps it's because she has seen no person other than her parents, or that the figure is pointing a weapon at her, and she is wondering whether this is one of the 'formidable carnivores' her parents have warned about, but Jasyn cannot stop staring.

The figure's face is difficult to read. Not cold, but calculating, as if she were the one staring down the arrow. Fewer layers, but still designed to keep the windchill out, her clothes are unlike Jasyn's; bolder, brighter, patch-worked together in deep greens and bright blues.

The arrow-wielder's hood toggles close to her scarf-wrapped neck. An orange glow from within the hood reminds Jasyn of fire, of heat. She feels compelled to warm her hands against the beacon of light, but refrains. Tufts of fringe protrude from under the stranger's hood, her locks as dark and fascinating as the night sky. In pleasing contrast to their snow-covered surroundings, and to Jasyn's own appearance, the stranger's skin is darker in hue. Her cheeks are plump with youth, which makes Jasyn consider they might be about the same age.

The stranger angles her head, perhaps for an audible clue of any potential threats hidden in the mist, but her gaze never

leaves Jasyn's. Her hunched posture is that of someone used to hiding. When she steps forward, offering a hand, Jasyn doesn't flinch.

Even the weather offers a moment of mist-clearing calm.

When Jasyn stands with assistance, the stranger's hand warms hers, as if she were made to exist in inclement surroundings. Jasyn is shorter by a couple of inches, enough to be looking up into wary eyes.

With slow movements, Jasyn checks herself for injuries. Her head throbs and her back hurts but, judging from her ability to stand and move her limbs, she is in one piece.

Only, the Shard is gone from her pocket.

Before Jasyn can hunt the ground for it, the arrow-wielder is already darting into the blizzard, the cool glow of the Shard clutched in her hand.

"Hey!" is all Jasyn can uselessly think to say as she pursues the nimble figure across the boulders.

Not only does she need to find the fever root, *fast*, she knows full well that without the Shard her family will struggle to last in the mountains. Nature's cruel irony: creating life-sustaining plants in similar design to poisonous ones. Without the Shard, foraging would be a near impossible task.

Which is why her leaden arms and legs force themselves to regain blood flow and conquer each obstacle in her path.

The frost-filled air cool against her cheeks, Jasyn runs faster and her heart pumps harder, warming her from within. If it weren't for her parents' lives hanging in the balance, she might find this challenge fun. It's a thrill to put her skills to the test.

The arrow-wielder glides across the terrain. The ice in the air swirls around them, darting left and right, as if it, too, were joining in the chase. When Jasyn catches up, mostly because the arrow-wielder has stopped, she senses no threat, despite the quiver packed with arrows. This is too much like a game.

There isn't time for games, she reminds herself with a growl of frustration as she snatches back the Shard. The arrow-wielder doesn't retaliate. She watches, intrigued, as if waiting for Jasyn to understand something. Jasyn isn't sure what it is about those galactic eyes, about her demeanour, but the combination invites her to simmer down.

The blizzard dissipates in an upward swirl, like rising smoke, unveiling the rock-sheltered peninsula in which they stand. And the tufts of grey-stemmed navy flowers.

As Jasyn recognises that the arrow-wielder's intention is to help, not hinder, sunshine bursts through clouds, spotlighting them, side by side, in the sparse meadow of the much-needed cure.



By the time Jasyn has plucked enough fever root to make the medicine, the arrow-wielder has disappeared. And though Jasyn would love to discover where she's run to, or where she came from, she has some parent-saving to be getting on with.

On her return journey down the cliff faces, she reminds herself that it would be foolish to have achieved the prize, only to fall to her death before completing her mission. A too-fast descent could result in an unwelcome ending. But so, too, could going too slow.

Striking a 'safe as she can manage in the circumstance' middle ground, she completes her descent and races back to her home cave. Her parents lie unconscious, but still shift the air with rasping breaths, clinging to life by fraying threads.

If only presenting the fever root to them like a triumphant trophy was enough for this battle to be won.

In following the Shard's instructions on how to prepare the flower, Jasyn discovers what her parents have always known. Patience is not her strong point.

Still, she follows each step with care, crushing the leaves and petals, gathering the juices and mixing them with heated

snow. She brings the bowl to her mother's lips, then her father's.

As a further stretch to her patience, all she can do then is wait.



Several days pass...

Once it is clear to Jasyn that her parents are not going to fall asleep and never wake again, once they are both on the cusp of their usual selves, she emerges from their cave to stretch her legs, to appreciate fresh air and open skies, and to go in search of the arrow-wielder.

Even though the evidence of their journey across the peaks has been lost to snowfall, Jasyn retraces from memory and her inner compass the path they took to find the fever root. When she happens across footprints, she's in equal measure surprised, relieved and thrilled. Her feet pick up pace of their own accord. And, in only a matter of moments, she is leaping across boulders and dodging jagged rocks, her smile widening with each stride.

After a while, her inner compass twists. Her smile cracks as she skids to a snow-puffing stop.

The footprints guiding her path haven't stopped, as she feared they might. They look as footprints should. To the untrained eye, the smattering of rocks might look like any other collection of grey against the white. But the patterns are unmistakeable. It's clear she's been here before, and only too recently.

Her parents often say the mountaintop ravines have a habit of raising the question of sanity, but Jasyn's mind isn't playing tricks – the arrow-wielder is.

She has Jasyn running, quite literally, in circles.

Does she not want to be found? Or is she playing a game?

The icy air prickles at Jasyn's ears. A mischievous chuckle on the breeze. She turns, but there's no one there. She could go home, abandon her mission, retreat from curiosity. Or she could wait.

To make herself visible, she claws up the nearest boulder and lies on it. Her many fabric layers stop the cold from seeping in, and with nothing obstructing her view of the sky in its ever-changing glory, she could lie here for hours.

It's possible she does. Thinking about the arrow-wielder. Thinking about what could have befallen her parents. About whether death is an end or a beginning. If it's *becoming the stars*, what does that mean for those who are in the sky? The ones looking down at her while she's looking up at them.

A boom ricochets across the peaks.

She bolts upright at the thunderous echo. Has a cliff face crumbled? Did she imagine the sound? Or is something going on in the higher peaks?

An invisible thread tugs her, guiding her attention to one peak in particular. The urge to climb and explore is magnetic. But so too is the need to find the arrow-wielder. And though her interest is more than piqued by the sounds from above, she waits. And waits. Until, finally, a warming orange glow recalibrates her curiosity and the sounds of the mountain are forgotten.

She is no longer alone.

Mirroring her, Jasyn sits cross-legged opposite the arrow-wielder. Albeit an arrow-wielder not currently wielding any arrows. At least, none pointing at her this time. Mechanical bow resting across her lap, the girl perches atop the rock, as though the breeze or sky had somehow delivered her here.

Relief kindles into a kind of happiness and a gentle snowfall drifts around them. Nothing else in the world, or the galaxy, or far beyond, matters.

With intrigue, Jasyn's eyes trace over the girl's bow, created from unfamiliar chrome and machine parts. Her galaxy-gaze observes Jasyn in turn. An orange glow emanates

from within the confines of her hood; though intrigued by the source of luminosity, there are more important matters to address.

“Thank you,” Jasyn begins, “for helping me.” The words feel flat compared to the swell of emotion behind them. *Thank you for saving my parents from death and for stopping my world from turning upside down and being left alone in the mountains.* Life in a cave with parents who welcome quiet and frown at questions, has made articulating heartfelt thanks or communicating feelings not one of Jasyn’s strong points.

When the girl responds only by wincing and holding Jasyn’s gaze, Jasyn wonders whether she understands.

“Where have you come from? Have you always been here? Where are your parents?” Jasyn pauses, not wanting to scare her away with her thousand questions.

Another wince follows and the girl slips her hand under her hood, her fingertips touching and dimming the orange glow within.

The silence, the orange glow, her eyes a confusing mix of confidence, calculation and apprehension, all add up to warrant the question:

“Are you...” Jasyn searches for the word, “...magic?”

The girl raises an eyebrow, clarifying that not only does she understand Jasyn, but what Jasyn is saying is ridiculous.

Jasyn blushes at her over-exuberance.

“I mean... There’s no such thing as magic. I know. My parents tell me that all the time. Just things that we don’t understand... And that’s a lot of things... But I guess, by that definition, you might be—”

An array of wincing precedes the girl reaching out and covering Jasyn’s mouth with her palm. It stops Jasyn’s words. The girl angles her right ear briefly away from Jasyn, causing her hood to fall and the ember-orange glow to unleash.

It takes a moment for Jasyn’s eyes to decipher the device at the light’s core. Behind the girl’s right ear sits a smooth dark

rock-like formation, with the glow of orange-veins cabling beneath its surface. The lines in the rock echo in the waves etched into the close-shaved sides of the girl's head.

Removing her warm hand from Jasyn's mouth, the girl gestures something that suggests 'lowering'.

"Oh," says Jasyn, to another wince. "Oh," she whispers. "Talk quieter?"

The girl nods with relief.

Jasyn expects her to retreat into the confines of her hood, but she stays as she is. Staring, it would appear she is as fascinated by Jasyn as Jasyn is by her.

"Do you have a name?" Jasyn asks, quietly.

A raised eyebrow greets her, which Jasyn can only assume means, *Of course I have a name*. Jasyn watches with interest as the arrow-wielder retrieves an arrow from the pouch across her back and writes with its tip in the recent smattering of fallen snow:

A
T
A
L
A
N
T
A

"Atlanta? That's your name?"

In response, the girl underlines the second letter A.

"Oh. Atalanta?" Jasyn smiles.

The girl called Atalanta points at the word in the snow, followed by a series of shapes with her hands.

Jasyn watches in wonder.

"You don't speak?" asks Jasyn, to which the response is another quirked eyebrow of *suitably unimpressed*. Jasyn corrects herself. "I mean, you don't speak out loud? You speak with your hands?"

Atalanta nods with the vaguest of smiles, perhaps pleased that Jasyn understands. With a grin, Jasyn adds her name into the snow and informs her: “I’m Jasyn.”

A
T
J A S Y N
L
A
N
T
A

Forming a series of shapes in the air with her hands, Atalanta spells out Jasyn’s name in her own signed language. Jasyn attempts to copy, but she must get it wrong because Atalanta shows her again and again, her warm hands guiding her until the shapes improve.

When Atalanta’s gaze and thumb linger over Jasyn’s right palm, where a pink triangle with a line through it bevels her skin (the scar she has had as long as she can remember), Jasyn wonders if she’s put off by the discovery. Atalanta signs something that Jasyn doesn’t understand. Only when she points between Jasyn’s scar and the peaked horizon does Jasyn get it: her scar looks like a mountain with its peak lost to the clouds.

Atalanta tugs gently at Jasyn’s off-snow hair and dapples her fingers along her nose and cheeks, examining her freckles. Her smile suggests she likes them, and Jasyn has never felt so seen.

The sun glows behind the clouds and they return to signing their names, practicing until Jasyn is able to spell both.

With time flying faster than a well-oiled sky ship breaking out of orbit, it is atop this boulder, in the enjoyment of each other’s company and in a cocoon of gentle snowfall, that Jasyn and Atalanta first learn to communicate.

THE INVISIBLE BEAST

Four *sun-orbits* later...

The solar-tinted skies are clear, the air is fresh, and Jasyn and Atalanta have no idea of the danger today has in store for them. As far as they are aware, as they scurry across the assault course of their surroundings, capes fluttering in their wake, taking it in turns to be the chaser and the chased, today is a perfect day.

Jasyn's advantage lies in leaping and landing, which could be described as reckless or adventurous, depending on perspective. Atalanta's approach is more considered. She listens and looks before she leaps. Though her calculations are swift, nothing rivals Jasyn's determination, apart from Atalanta's arrows.

A soaring whistle flicks past Jasyn's temple. The subsequent *thwack* between rocks startles her. That she may in fact not just be the chased but the hunted lodges in her mind, only to dissolve upon the sight of her friend's bright and mischievous grin.

Getting to know Atalanta is a frustration and a thrill. Jasyn wants to know everything: where she lives, who she lives with, and how they have come to be in the mountains. But it has quickly become apparent that Atalanta has no enthusiasm for sharing such details.

Once they had learned to understand each other, Jasyn had asked about the bow and arrows, and about the lump of orange-veined grey rock behind her right ear. Atalanta had told

her that the rock-lump augments her hearing and she'd spelt out its name as a T-R-A-N-S-O-N-I-C but wasn't keen to share much else.

Through the knowledge banks of the Shard – the part her parents don't like her exploring because it only encourages questions – Jasyn had discovered entries on everything from mythical adventures to musical instruments, but nothing about Transonics.

Enquiring about the bow and arrow had resulted in Atalanta reluctantly sharing that the implements are used by her people to hunt for food. But when asked 'what people?' and 'what food?' Atalanta had darted away and hadn't returned for three days. On her return, she did, as if in apology, go on to explain that the bow is a weapon her mother had taught her to use, but to be able to do so, she needed to practise.

And Jasyn is an excellent moving target.

Having played this game many times over the last four sun-orbits, at last count making them both about twelve sun-orbits old, Jasyn knows Atalanta's aim to be accurate to the point of near-impossibility. The only way Jasyn will get an arrow embedded in her flesh is if Atalanta intends it.

And it is this knowledge that renders Atalanta's arrows ineffective in their chase.

Jasyn's asymmetric braided blond hair hugs her head, cool air nipping at her scalp. That her hair doesn't get in the way as she grabs for a rock-hold, resulting in her *not* falling to her death, is a welcome detail as she scales the cliff face, pushing to reach higher than she has before.

She hasn't noticed Atalanta has stopped.

She hasn't noticed the extra layer of sound in the atmosphere, beyond her auditory abilities. She has no idea that the arrows, clipping ahead of her hands, are designed not to challenge her, but to get her attention.

Though puzzled by Atalanta's insistence, by the time Jasyn turns to peer down, her friend is too distant to ascribe any

meaning to her expression, or to decipher the shapes she makes with her hands.

Telling herself it's a clever ploy to win the game and tempted by the mushroom-cloud of mist only a few reaches above, Jasyn continues upward. If Atalanta wants to tell her something, she'll have to catch up.

Something is drawing her higher. Whether it's the spirit of adventure or something else, Jasyn isn't concerned. She just wants to go *up*.

As she claws through the ice-mist, she conquers the cliff top. Exhausted elation pulses through her. She grins. This is higher than they've been before.

She'd expected to feel on top of the world, but staring at the mist, there's no sign of a world down there. Though her first-hand experience is only of caves, mountains and clouds, she imagines the expanse of undulating mist-fluff might appear something like an ocean.

In the knowledge-banks of the Shard, she'd discovered pictures of oceans and the sea-ships that once sailed upon them before the waters froze.

The clouds appear soft enough to jump upon or to dive into. Her knowledge and sense having grown in the sun-orbits since her attempt to reach for the stars, Jasyn resists this urge. As if shaped from her own thoughts, the clouds twist and present an amalgamation of features that combine into a vague concept of 'sea-ship'. Jasyn looks to her side for a clue as to whether this is in her imagination, but remembers Atalanta is still scaling the cliff face.

Jasyn wishes she'd hurry so they could explore this place together.

Whatever this place is...

She turns to the plateau. Different to the mountains below, up here is smooth and open. There's a wall of rock up ahead, which means they're not at the top yet. There's at least one higher peak to explore, but she shouldn't get ahead of herself. They've not explored this one yet!

It's early afternoon, and already stars are winking down at her.

In the context of death being akin to *becoming the stars* – as her mother had suggested and the Shard had noted as a possibility – well, that makes staring up at them and wanting to explore them a tad morbid, doesn't it?

She'd looked up STARS on the Shard and discovered that people travel amongst them, but there had been no information about what that looks like. Apparently, information about food types and dangers to avoid and historical concepts such as sea ships are more important than something that might actually be interesting.

Jasyn's eyes roam the far end of the plateau, occupied by a cave mouth with a fragmented, snow-covered bulbous formation in between. An invisible thread tugs her towards the cave, but she digs her heels in. She should wait.

She looks to her feet for distraction.

Sturdy grey-green stalks stand the height of Jasyn's ankles. The delicate petal lantern at the top of each stalk is eye-catching; it's as if the plant knows it must be resilient, but insists on doing so in style. Snow still punctuates the landscape, but the meadow wins out, growing in insistent tufts. The expanse of colour here is more concentrated than any she's ever seen in vegetation.

The Shard has let her in on the secret of *seasons*: that there are – in theory – states for the world to be in, other than winter. There are times when things grow more freely, liberated from ice and snow. Only on seeing the meadow of burgundy flowers before her does she start to believe this theory.

Intrigued, Jasyn sources the Shard from her shirt pocket and places a petal against the sensor. She waits while the device processes, blinking through its extensive knowledge banks. She'd convinced her parents to let her take the Shard so she might forage and return with supplies. She'd always been warned off the peaks, but she's fairly certain her parents would approve *if* she discovered a new source of food.

To Jasyn, it's as clear as uncontaminated ice that exploring will widen their world. Treading the same paths each day, with nothing new, is no way to live. But just as she has no intention of telling her parents that she has a friend, there's no point telling them about other things that will only make them say *No*.

When the screen determines that the plant is, in fact, UNKNOWN, Jasyn exhales. She should be disappointed that the plant isn't confirmed edible, but the prospect of a *new discovery* is just as rejuvenating. The act of finding flora that had never been found – well, that's something to be excited about, isn't it? Not bad going for an explorer who hasn't been anywhere.

If only Atalanta would hurry up so she can show her.

Jasyn's legs wobble, the exertion and adrenalin of scaling the cliff face catching up with her. Excitement likely has something to do with it, too. While she waits, she flops against a mound of snow.

Just as she's deciding that she'll likely name her new discovery a 'bell-poppy', she registers a warmth emanating from the snow. She might not know the properties of a bell-poppy, but she knows snow isn't meant to have heat.

Nor is it meant to move.

Rhythmic and unsettling, gently up and down...

Jasyn's stomach knots. *All is not as it should be.*

The skies grumble.

Or perhaps it's something else...

Without moving more than her eyes, Jasyn stares into a waking eye as large as her own trembling hand. Awash with the reflection of the bell-poppy field, the kaleidoscope of colours within the creature's iris would be beautiful, if it weren't terrifying.

The creature's head tapers to a nose hidden in the sprigs of burgundy. With fur the colour of snow, clawed paws larger than Jasyn's head, and teeth as jagged and sharp as stalactites,

it would appear that the roars from the mountaintops have their origin in something other than the weather, after all.

DANCE OF THE FIREFLIES

The Shard drops from Jasyn's grasp as she stumbles backwards into a tuft of newly named bell-poppies. The flower's cushion-like consistency is lost on her as she stares up at the forbidding mass blocking out the sky.

Shrouded in the creature's shadow, Jasyn winces as a growling rumble percolates deep within its throat. Nausea floods her as she notes that its four thick legs are individually larger than her, each punctuated by a double row of claws that *clack-clack-clack-clack* against rock underfoot.

This isn't like when she thought she would lose her parents. That was more of a gut-twisting helplessness and anticipation of loss. This is sharper, more visceral: the promise of pain coursing through her.

The creature shifts its weight. Its movements are slow and uncoordinated. It could be its nature, or because it's waking. Its nose lowers, ruffling Jasyn's hair and clothes in time with its grumbling breaths. She has little idea whether the creature is trying to discern the level of threat, or whether it's considering a source of food.

She doesn't want to linger to find out.

She rolls over, scooping up the Shard, launching to her feet and racing away, surprising even herself with the fluid motion.

A blast of air knocks her off her feet half a second before the air-splintering roar follows in its wake. The Shard slips from her grasp as she crashes to the ground, her knees clunking against something solid.

Her palms break her fall, meeting cold, dull metal.
Emblazoned on the dented surface, scuffed paintwork:

D-0-VE

Whatever that means.

If she weren't under threat of becoming a light snack, if the thick, ripped edge of metal weren't pierced into her palm and leaking red across the strange lettering, she might be more inclined to find out.

A shadow floods over her.

An air-shifting swipe of a massive paw.

She rolls aside.

Double-claws slice her ear before punching down, crunching the Shard into a thousand pieces before piercing the metal underneath.

Hail.

Her chest pangs with terror.

Her torn cartilage throbs hot and angry as blood trickles down her cheek.

Another lumbering paw swipe punches the air.

Jasyn recoils.

A mere whisper of contact and the mighty claws shred through her layers. She checks her midriff. Her shirt in tatters. The cool air prickles her skin.

Her head in a spin, her nerves roar.

And her legs obey.

But glinting claws descend—

She braces for impact—

Whwoooooooooop-TING!

A soaring arrow blunts the sharpest claws.

In unison, Jasyn and the beast turn to the huntress silhouette of Atalanta at the cliff edge. Relief and terror

intermingle in Jasyn's gut. If she weren't so preoccupied, she might be impressed.

The beast lumbers over Jasyn, leaving her unscathed by luck rather than design. Its pace increases... it'll soon be in claw-swiping distance of Atalanta. Even if she were to put arrow to bow in time, the creature's mass alone threatens to knock her over the edge.

"Hey... Hey..." Jasyn's voice warbles, failing to distract.

The beast bellows.

Atalanta's own earth-shuddering guttural wail doubles her over. Jasyn can almost see the sound waves assaulting the frigid air, exploding outwards from the epicentre of Atalanta.

Jasyn and the creature are equally startled.

The sound carries across the mountains, returning to them in a series of echoes. Jasyn stares. Atalanta's language is shapes. It hadn't occurred to Jasyn that she could make such a sound.

But there's no time to dwell.

Startled though the creature may be, it's not stopping. It hurtles towards Atalanta, who doesn't race away from the creature, but towards it.

Jasyn's heart quick-marches against her eardrums.

Air thickens about her fists.

At the point where impact is imminent—

As the creature's jaws snap—

Atalanta ducks and twists and slides across the bed of bell-poppies, sailing beneath the hulking creature, swapping places and — *somehow* — emerging intact.

She and Jasyn only have time to help each other stand, before the creature's razor-claws skid-rip through the bell-poppies as it about-turns.

Wide awake now.

With little option but to retreat onto the plateau, Jasyn follows the pull of the invisible thread, tugging her towards the darkness of the gargantuan cave mouth. With all her might, she hopes it's not a dead end and that they can lose the creature in the dark.

As she bounds for the threshold, it occurs to her that the creature must know this place far better than she does, but there's little she can do about that now.

She doesn't see Atalanta's expression and hand movements imploring her to stop. She doesn't comprehend that Atalanta races after her not to escape the creature chasing them, but to try to pull her back.

Jasyn's silent question of whether this is a good idea, or whether it will undo them, is answered as she charges into the dark and slams into a wall both solid and soft.

A damp musky odour that's all too recently familiar tickles her nostrils as she gasps for breath. The grumbles from the waking beast draped in darkness resound deeper and louder.

Jasyn's gaze hunts upwards for the opening eyes. The sinking in the pit of her stomach whispers what her trembling legs have already realised: that the creature lumbering towards the cave is only a cub, and *this is a much bigger beast*.

In all her life, a *mountain bear* has been a term of endearment. Why is a fanged creature with a roar to turn her insides to mush *a term of endearment*?

Jasyn grasps backwards for Atalanta's hand, tugging her along she darts into the cave's cooler depths. As they race forward, their hands part. By the time Jasyn about-turns, even the orange glow of Atalanta's Transonic has been relegated to shadow.

She must have switched it off.

A good thing, too, for there's nothing like a lava-veined beacon to lead a monster's path through the dark. Jasyn hopes with all her might that the creatures don't have night vision. And that Atalanta is beyond their reach.

Jasyn presses herself behind a stalagmite taller than she is, her dark grey cape blending with her surroundings. The darkness is so oppressive, and her attempts at silent breaths so strained, it wouldn't take much to convince her she's being buried in a landslide.

She cradles her palm to her chest, her cut hand an adrenalin-dulled ache. The rattle of the creature's nostrils taunts her.

Can it smell her blood?

Heart in her throat, she grasps at the ground with her uninjured hand. Is the softness yet another beast she's stumbled against? It feels different, though, like fabric rather than fur.

Peril stretches time and abilities. Jasyn's eyes wade through the sea of shadows, assisted by the smattering of glow worms dappling light across higher parts of the walls. Something catches her eye, drawing her closer.

Etchings in the cavern wall. Though difficult to decipher in the vague, drifting light, the shapes take the form of a tree of fire, set against a backdrop of stars.

How long have these markings been here? Who put them here? Why?

Her palm finds something cold. Ever the explorer, Jasyn investigates the round disc of smooth metal. She's too deep in the shadows to make out the shapes within its circle, but whatever it is, it unclips.

As her eyes adjust further, her immediate surroundings emerge. The soft substance is fabric, straps and buckles all matted together. The material is in tatters, mere rags of rips and dark stains. A nest of destroyed clothing.

The tangle in Jasyn's stomach tells her this discovery doesn't bode well. The angular lengths of ivory within the mound confirm it. This isn't a nest, but a heap of leftovers.

In that moment, Jasyn learns that not only are there other people who have braved the mountain, but that didn't live to tell the tale.

And this will be how she and Atalanta will meet their end, too, if they don't find a way out.

And it's her fault. If she hadn't been so intent on climbing higher, moving faster, *impressing Atalanta*, they wouldn't be in this mess. If something happens to Atalanta, Jasyn will never forgive herself.

With the nostril rattle quieter than before, Jasyn peers around the stalagmite. When something squeezes her hand, she almost cries out with fright, but a warm hand clamps over her mouth.

Atalanta.

Her Transonic inert. Her body's warmth a confusing comfort. The only plus in all this life and death terror is getting to be close to Atalanta. Jasyn has no idea what that sentiment means, and she's certain right now is not the time to figure it out.

Atalanta removes her palm from Jasyn's mouth and their eyes drift to the two creatures circling at the entrance. As their massive forms block the vague daylight, the darkness thickens.

A rainbow of light illuminates the fear on Atalanta's face.

Four epic eyes, two pairs, different sizes – the eyes of both mother and cub – stare down at them.

Atalanta's grip on Jasyn's hand tightens.

Her heart in her throat, her mouth agape, Jasyn can only stare.

If there was no way out before, now their time is up.

Thwack. Thwack.

Two arrows in quick succession arrive at the feet of the beasts, making them rear. The arrows make little sense: Atalanta is right beside her.

Tugged by the arm, she follows Atalanta to take cover behind a boulder. The beasts' roars shake the cavern and shudder Jasyn's insides. Still, she can't help but peer over the rock.

Glowing eyes flecked with every colour hunt the darkness. Their claws *tap-tap-tap-tap* along the stone ground.

A familiar floating fire-ember glow stalks in from the cave entrance, slipping past the cub as deftly as the breeze.

If it weren't for clutching Atalanta's quaking hand already, Jasyn might have assumed the origin of the orange glow to be her.

The archer is taller than Atalanta and moves with fluid grace as both beasts lock onto her scent, circle her and swipe. Her swift movements form ribbons of orange light, like a dance of fireflies, trailed by kaleidoscopic beast eyes.

Swipes and scuffs. Scrapes and roars.

Thwack, followed by an almighty thud and silence.

The orange 'firefly' hovers, victorious.

As the light in her cub's eyes fades, the mother-beast offers a sorrow-tainted warble. Jasyn's stomach twists. She never meant for anyone, for any creature, to get hurt.

A mere fraction of a moment passes, but it's enough. As swift as an arrow strike, the mother-beast lashes out her claw-serrated paw. The archer has no choice but to obey the laws of physics and sail across the cave to skid into a heap at Jasyn and Atalanta's feet.

Releasing Jasyn's hand, Atalanta rushes to the woman's side. Even in the half-light, with terror clipping at her heels, their resemblance is as clear as a golden day.

The heavy thud-scrapes of paws against rock grow closer, louder.

The archer remains floored, her bearings and balance upended.

Terror steals Jasyn's breath. Helplessness churns within her, rage at herself for not looking before leaping, guilt at her actions and their outcome; all whipping into a storm.

A gale howls through the cave entrance, ruffling the lumbering beast's fur as it roars accompaniment to the air's

whistles and screams.

The scrape of claws amplifies, closing in.

The air knots around them.

Jasyn is nothing compared to the might of the magnificent creature, but what can she do?

She steps forward, offering herself as a feeble barrier to keep Atalanta and their protector safe.

The screaming gale swirls, ruffling hair, fabric and fur.

The creature upon them—

Angered eyes—

Teeth dripping saliva—

Fear floods Jasyn's veins, crystallising within her as she raises her forearm and clamps her eyes shut.

RAZOR TEETH

A crackling crunch tears through Jasyn's nerves.

But no pain follows.

It's all distant, like there's a wall between her and what's happening. Perhaps that's how the mind and body protect you when you're being ripped apart by the impossibly large teeth of a carnivorous beast...

But it's so at odds with her expectations, Jasyn opens her eyes.

There are no beast jaws wrapped around her, no limbs being torn from her. Only a dome of thick ice, encasing her, Atalanta and the archer.

With the distorted beast's razor teeth shearing the outer ice layers, there isn't time to consider where it came from, or how – though Jasyn has more than a suspicion it has something to do with her.

Stumbling towards Atalanta, Jasyn attempts to help the archer to her feet. Only now does she notice the woman's red slickened midriff, her clothes shredded by the claw swipe. Her flesh, too.

The sky rumbles.

Though the woman stands, any triumph is short-lived. As protective as it may be, the dome has them trapped.

But this is only an issue for a moment longer–

Gnashing jaws crunch and break through. The cocoon dissipates into a shower of shards. The beast snaps, only for the trap of its jaws to be hinged open by the lumps of ice caught between its teeth.

The archer grasps Jasyn and Atalanta, tugging them out of the cave and into the whipping winds. Jasyn's feet might be weighed down by fear, but the woman's grip on her wrist gives her little choice but to keep pace.

At the edge of the cliff, an anchored rope awaits them. Jasyn steals a glance back as the creature wrestles free from the jaw-clogging chunks of ice and sprints towards them. With each bound of the beast, time seems to both slow and speed up, as if even the universe can't decide which would make this moment more terrifying.

As claws scrape against rock and vegetation, decapitating an entire runway of bell-poppies in its wake, at the archer's gestured direction, Atalanta takes to the rope first, followed by Jasyn.

The confidence that had buoyed Jasyn when climbing up abandons her on their descent. If she doesn't make quick work of scaling down the rope, their saviour will be savaged. If she goes too fast, she'll knock Atalanta from her climb.

The sharp blizzard doesn't help.

When the beast's growling grumbles amplify, Jasyn glances up.

A paw lunges, taunting them as the beast levers over the edge. Its startled ferocity sparkles within its rainbow-rippling eyes. Pummelled by its paw, the air displaces, but the three of them are beyond the creature's reach. The beast may have many skills and advantages in hunting, but climbing this particular route – much to their collective relief – is not one of them.

Roars accompany their descent as they plunge into the sea of clouds.

When they finally reach the ground, there isn't time to exchange even a glance with Atalanta before the archer slips

from the rope. Even Jasyn can guess her heavy, awkward landing is uncharacteristic.

The iced ground pools red and there's little doubt that her life hangs by a fast-fraying thread. Jasyn's insides ache with regret as Atalanta swoops to the woman's side. Their resemblance is undeniable, their features following the same pattern. Jasyn might even guess them to be identical, their only difference being age.

The woman who must be Atalanta's mother quietens her daughter's hands and returns slowed gestures, her words hidden by Atalanta's buckling posture.

Atalanta's tears tug at Jasyn's stomach, heart, all her insides at once. She wishes she could form a cocoon around them and heal their wounds. She wishes she could undo all of this and make Atalanta's pain go away. She wishes she hadn't been so arrogant.

But wishes hold no muster in this unforgiving, inhospitable world.

Atalanta's mother removes the rock-lump Transonic from behind her ear and presses it into her daughter's palm. Though Jasyn doesn't understand the hand gestures that precede and follow, she comprehends well enough the expanding island of blood, the woman's growing weakness, the dying light in her eyes, and the harrowing ache of Atalanta's tears.

This is goodbye.

Atalanta grips the blood-soaked tatters of her mother's clothes, as if doing so might make the life force find its way back in. Her arms vibrate around her as if she may never let go. She unleashes a guttural cry, tainted not with fear, but with sorrow, echoed by the distant cries of the grief-stricken beast up above.

The duet of loss reverberates across the mountaintops and Jasyn knows, in the pit of her stomach and the ache of her bones, there is nothing... *nothing*, she can do to make this right.

THE CREEPING ICE

*H*ours pass.

Howling winds replace harrowing sobs as the setting sun drains the terrain to greyscale. Despite the threat of darkness on the horizon, the inevitable Night Freeze, Atalanta remains anchored to her mother's side.

Emptied of tears, she stares at nothing and no one.

Jasyn should be back at the cave by now, and Atalanta should be... wherever it is she retreats to when she's not with her. In all their time together, there hasn't been a day where Atalanta didn't 'disappear' into the mountains. Jasyn had tried to follow her once, but quickly decided it better to respect boundaries. She'd asked, but Atalanta had always distracted her with games of tag or scavenger hunts. It's not as though Jasyn could *make* Atalanta tell her things about her life.

It didn't matter. Not really. Their friendship wasn't based on such details. They played together, they made each other's days fun, they made time take flight.

Or they used to.

Now, Jasyn is left to question whether Atalanta has another parent out there, worrying about her, or if the person lying forever still in the uneven terrain is the entirety of her family.

It's too dark now to descend the slopes and scale the ledges. Though Jasyn welcomes a challenge, she has only recently discovered that such challenges can have dire consequences. Whether or not they want to be here, they are

stuck until dawn, and she hopes the biting cold and sorrow are the only thing they'll need to fight off tonight.

Encased in their capes, they shiver against each other. Limbs aching from the recent exertion and unforgiving cold, Jasyn pulls the fabric about her neck, breathing into it to encourage warmth. She wishes she could rewind time, but that's asking the impossible. As the last ember of light disappears from the jagged horizon, the tangle in Jasyn's stomach twists tighter as she spies the glinting eyes emerging from the nooks of the cliff.

Within moments, the mountainside writhes with movement.

The scratching of claws against rock. The pitter-patter of snow compacting. En masse squeaks plague the air, high-pitched and piercing, the racket of creatures who scurry and scavenge.

At least now Jasyn has an answer to the questions *What creatures leave tiny tracks in the snow?* And, *Where do they live?*

She has only seen vole-rats in the knowledge banks of the Shard. Nocturnal creatures, their grey-black shades of fur blend with the shadows. Their cool blue eyes, self-illuminating pin-prick beacons, guide them. *Carnivorous.*

The ever-increasing quantity of creatures meander towards them. Dozens of eyes blink closer. *Can they smell death? Is that what brings them here? Or has their hunting ground merely been interrupted?*

Their presence awakens Atalanta's inner warrior. Without warning, she swipes the air with her bow in an arc around them. It takes only a few warning swipes for the vole-rats to screech a retreat. After a few feral breaths, Atalanta returns to her mother's side. But time ticks on and the creatures forget or grow bold.

Again, they creep.

This time, Jasyn lunges. The creatures recoil, but only for a second. When she attempts to startle them into submission,

running at them, bellowing, they respond with screech-bellows of defiance.

Jasyn stumbles back.

The second she hits the ground, several creatures scurry across her. So light, individually. If it weren't for their claws scratching her face and jagged teeth glinting like shattered ice in moonlight, she wouldn't know they're there.

A sharp pain at her chin and a bite to her bleeding palm lets her know that these creatures care little for whether their source of sustenance is living or dead. If Jasyn and Atalanta don't do something, they'll be the latter.

The swarm rises over Jasyn, threatening to bury and eat her alive. Her chest tightens. Her senses swim.

With wild terror in her eyes, Atalanta swipes the creatures from Jasyn, but each one seems to replace with two. Swiping enough away for Jasyn's hand to punch out from the writhing mass, Atalanta grasps her and pulls her to her feet.

Insistent claws maintain their grip. While Jasyn grapples with them, Atalanta fights the losing battle against the cascade encroaching on the perimeter of her mother's corpse.

The vole-rats divide between the three bodies, hazing about each like iron filings smothering a lode stone.

Though Atalanta's strength is impressive, and her resolve unfaltering, it will only be a matter of time before the former wanes and the latter becomes irrelevant.

Eaten alive by a swarm of hungry vole-rats will be a harrowing way to go. It doesn't seem right, or fair, nor many other things, that they should perish this night. On a realistic level, it seems logical and, at this point, inevitable, but the very idea has Jasyn's fists clenched in defiance.

The mass of creatures trips her.

As she falls backwards, a seismic shift of fear and frustration jolts within her. She grasps the ground as if it were a creature to be grabbed by the scruff and given a piece of her

mind. And in that spark of a moment, the terrain prickles with ice.

A crystalline mesh forms from Jasyn's fingertips; where there's ice, more crystals grow. If the tonal energy of the terrain and situation were more positive, it might be considered *flourishing*, but everything being as it is, the tremors of ice spring up in fibrous infection.

The formation overtakes not one, not two, but three vole-rats, encasing them in a network of ice so solid they may as well be stone. The creatures screech *panic*, as those in the path of Jasyn's frustration are trapped in the ice-mesh.

Ice flows molten in her veins, spilling from her and reshaping their surroundings...

What is happening? She might be creating it, but she has little control over it.

No idea how to stop it.

Like a lash of lightning, the tremor forks in several directions at once. The occasional stalagmite bursts up from the ground, at multiple angles. Unsuspecting vole-rats find themselves startled or skewered, or both.

It takes only moments for the rest of the creatures to disperse. With the ensuing silence, the ice thickened within her, Jasyn clambers to her feet and skids to Atalanta's side, only to find the ground around Atalanta's mother crackling with ice, fusing her into a frozen casket.

Atalanta rips at the forming mesh with the tip of her bow, but the crystals layer faster than she can tackle them. Abandoning her bow, her gloved hands dig into the scorching ice.

Fearing the ice infection could spread to Atalanta, Jasyn pulls her back, clutching her tight despite her thrashing protests. Aware of the blue-blip eyes watching from the cliff wall, and of the cold whose jaws will bite all the harder the further into night they reach, Jasyn's need to keep Atalanta safe simmers within her, so strong, she can imagine it taking shape.

Icy air swirls around them.

From the ground up, crystalline formations and deposits combine, row after row. In a matter of seconds, the blizzard has sealed them into a structure not unlike an opaque snow-globe.

Only then does the tension shudder from Atalanta in sobs as she buckles into Jasyn's arms. As Atalanta exhausts herself with tears, they huddle together in their bubble of thickened ice. And Jasyn silently swears to never put them in the path of danger again.

SHATTERED

A vice crushing her chest, Jasyn gasps awake.

Her heart racing. Her breathing rapid. At her sudden movement, Atalanta stirs.

Jasyn's mind trudges through the horror of what has happened, hunts past the question of why her head pounds and how neither of them can catch their breath.

Air...

They're out of air.

Her heart rate sails skywards and Jasyn's drowsiness overwrites with clarity. She hazards to her feet and thumps the thickened ice that contains them. Her arms heavy, each hit tugs her into the depths of exhaustion, her knuckles and the ice turning crimson.

Atalanta clutches Jasyn back from damaging herself further. Before she can think to protest that their lives depend on escaping this capsule of her own creation, Atalanta claims an arrow from her quiver and hacks at the wall of ice.

Jasyn follows suit, and together they dig and stab, until the surface shatters and the reluctant sunrise drips over them.

Finally, they can breathe.

They tumble from what could have been their tomb. The green-hazed light of the lingering dual moons limps above the horizon, offering little solace from the biting cold.

Atalanta's wild eyes hunt the morning shadows, ready to strike any creature that dares to venture close enough. But only the vole-rat eyes in their own minds threaten them.

A thick freeze remains where Atalanta's mother lies, protected by the ice in her eternal hibernation. A pressure throbs behind Jasyn's eyes. The sharp air scratches her aching lungs. Her breaths are short and unrewarding, her limbs leaden. The ache of her joints tells her she'll turn to ice if they don't find their way to warmth soon.

Atalanta stands taller, but Jasyn isn't able to discern if that is a mere issue of height or physical strength. Either way, they stumble along together, supporting and tripping each other in equal measure.

If their situation needed a further challenge, the encasing mist does the trick. The white-out offers landmark-blocking thickness that threatens to lead them over a ledge, or in circles forever.

An uncertain amount of time passes, and Jasyn doesn't know how far they've travelled and which way they should go next. But her lungs appear to be allowing her to breathe again. And she can stand on her own.

Turning to check on Atalanta, Jasyn finds herself alone.

"Atalanta?"

The mist offers no clue.

Jasyn calls out louder, but the mountains only whistle and groan. If she didn't know any better, she'd think the terrain itself were taunting her.

"Jasyn?" Chiron's voice, frantic and close. "Oh, thank the heavens."

Jasyn turns in every direction in search of Atalanta. With one turn too many, she stumbles backwards, against the smooth and familiar contours of her home cave.

Atalanta must have guided her here.

"We were so worried." Rhea's voice now, as warm, welcome and desperate as the hug that envelops her. "Where

were you?”

It isn't clear whether the question is rhetorical, because the subject soon turns to her bloodied hands, her torn ear and ripped clothing. “What happened?”

Words abandon Jasyn as she stares at her red-cruised knuckles and the jagged cut in her right palm, intersecting her scar formed of triangles. She numbly accepts her mother's insistence that she clean and dress her wounds. How is she supposed to make them understand everything that's happened? Where should she begin? That she's harboured a secret friendship? That she climbed too high? That it ended in death and it's all her fault?

Seeing the worry in her parents' eyes, their need for an explanation, wishing her words could undo what happened, Jasyn confesses about her friend, about the mountain bears, about being saved, about the vole-rats and all that happened in the peaks. She doesn't share the ice formed from her feelings. Do they even know her power of ice? If they don't, what will they think of her? If they do, why haven't they mentioned it? Is that why they always encourage her to calm?

There are too many thoughts swirling in the white-out of Jasyn's mind. She refuses to mention her responsibility for the archer's death. It's too heavy a burden not to crush her should she confront it.

From her parents' reaction, three important details merit concern. The first is the existence of Atalanta. Or, rather, of *other people* in the mountains. *Who are they? How many of them are there? Why are they here? What do they want?* Jasyn wishes she could answer, but all she can offer is:

“She's my friend.”

She tries to tell them that Atalanta would never hurt them, but by that point Rhea and Chiron's conversation appears to be only with each other.

The second concern is the existence of carnivorous creatures within their orbit. Large and small.

“But the mountain bears can’t reach us,” Jasyn protests, trying to reason with her pacing parents. “They’re stuck up above—”

“Never mind the mountain bears,” says Rhea, her tone as biting as frost. “Once vole-rats taste your blood, they know your scent. They track you down.”

Jasyn gulps. It’s a shuddering thought. Though it does explain the creatures’ strangely dexterous noses.

The third and final concern is the loss of the Shard.

Chiron summarises their predicament: “How are we meant to survive up here when food and poison look the same?”

It’s a fair question. One for which Jasyn has no retort. Without the Shard they’ll be relying on luck to decipher which is which. She hadn’t meant for it to be destroyed. She hadn’t meant for a lot of recent events to happen.

“It’s time. We have to leave the mountains,” says Rhea, to Chiron’s reluctant but resigned nod of agreement.

Struggling to grasp her parents’ thinking, Jasyn interrupts their back and forth about what needs to be packed:

“I thought there’s nothing for us out there? The lower slopes are poison?”

“You’ve left us with little choice.” Chiron’s voice rises.

“It’s not Jasyn’s fault the creatures are awake,” says Rhea, but the look that passes between her parents calls into question the truth of the statement.

What’s that supposed to mean?

Snowdrop, the claw-goat, watches the exchange with her usual cross-eyed expression.

“Pack only the essentials.” Rhea tells Jasyn. “We’re leaving. Now.”

“What? No...”

Had Jasyn never crossed paths with Atalanta, she would have jumped at this chance of exploring new horizons. As it is,

with her friend missing in the mist, it is the last thing she wants to do.

“The mountains are waking, Jasyn,” says Rhea. “To them, we are food. And we’re in their world.”

“Aren’t they in ours?” asks Jasyn.

“Does it matter?” says Rhea, exasperated. “They’re the ones with teeth that bite through bone.”

“I need to find my friend—”

“What is so wrong with doing what you’re told, Jasyn?” Chiron’s outburst startles Snowdrop. “We told you not to go into the higher peaks. And now—”

“You never told me why.” Jasyn’s fists clench at her sides. “You never answer my questions. How am I supposed to make good decisions if you don’t give me the facts?”

The skies echo the sentiment with a rumble of annoyance.

“All we do is keep you safe,” says Chiron to himself and to the heavens.

The sour and stifling mood circles them like a building anticyclone.

“We can’t leave her behind,” says Jasyn, darting beyond her parents’ reach and protests.

With the light creeping over the peaks and the chill not yet blunted, Jasyn searches for her lost friend. The first place she looks is their boulder, the one that ordinarily offers an unobstructed view up to the sky.

Today, mist obscures visibility.

Swiping away her tears, Jasyn climbs onto the boulder and waits. Digging the lump from her pocket, she thumbs the decorative metal she found in the mountain bear cave. Its intricate shaping is similar to the wall-etching of the tree of flames, its colour an odd mix of silver and flecked gold. Though preoccupied by Atalanta’s wellbeing and whereabouts, Jasyn’s thoughts turn to the ill-fated owner of the metal clip. *What had this item meant to them? Was it a*

sentimental token? A piece of treasure? It's doubtful its owner ever considered it would become a souvenir of Jasyn's stupidity.

She sighs. The answers won't do her situation any good.

When it's clear Atalanta isn't going to join her here, Jasyn seeks their familiar haunts. She tells the breeze what's happening, that her parents have decided they're leaving, hoping her words will find their way to Atalanta's ears.

Hours pass.

Every flutter of air, every imagined scuffle, has Jasyn turning in quick circles, fearing she hasn't about-turned fast enough. In all this time, she finds nothing and no one. As the sun is setting, the unwelcome possibility dawns on her that Atalanta does not want to be found.

Jasyn doesn't blame her.

It's possible she has another parent, or a whole extended family up in the mountains, none of whom caused the death of her mother.

When Jasyn returns to her parents, she tunes out their scolding tirade as if their angered words are attempting to reach her from behind a wall of ice. Her parents are furious and frantic. With too few hours left in the day to travel, they have no choice but to remain in the mountains one more night. Jasyn hopes the extra night will show them that they're over-reacting. That there's no need to run.

But the mountain has other ideas.

DOWN THE SLOPES

It's not long after sunset that the scratching begins.

Her parents had spent what little time there was left in the day blocking the cave's entrance with rocks and infilling gaps with anything that would fit. Numbed by recent events, Jasyn fails to engage with what's going on, until the scuffle of tiny claws against rock begins and dexterous noses start to poke through weaknesses in the barricade.

When a lone vole-rat bites her ear, hanging from her cartilage by its teeth, she swipes the creature away. She hadn't known it was in the cave, let alone on her shoulder. Her skin starts to crawl, even when there's nothing there.

It turns out there's not much more haunting than the en masse frenzy of screaming vole-rats trying to break through rushed defences. The individual scratches overlay into a distracting din and the creatures get brave, or are adept at finding their way through impossible gaps.

They spill into the cave.

The memory of those cool blue pinprick eyes hunting the dark is punctuated by the real and present danger of the same. Jasyn and her parents deal with each trespassing rodent in an irreversible and splattering fashion.

Nauseating.

Even Snowdrop the claw-goat gives stomping and head-butting a good go.

Did the creatures taste Atalanta's blood, too? Is she out there, suffering the same? Is she all alone? The thought that she might be struggling and there's nothing Jasyn can do plagues her like a writhing mass of... well... *vole-rats*.

Last night she'd turned them to ice. A wall of ice would be useful right now. She could mesh the rocks at the door together, solidify the structure, but she doesn't know how. It's as if the events of last night, of yesterday, have sapped her resources.

Which isn't particularly helpful right now.

The fraught and sleepless night spent plugging barricade gaps and swatting the fierce creatures that slip through ensures Jasyn's understanding of what her parents already knew: that they can no longer stay in the mountains.

At daybreak, the scuffling fades to silence, and Snowdrop is unleashed to buckle the barricade from within. With their worldly possessions in carry sacks, they waste no time. They hope to travel far enough in one day to stretch beyond the reach of the blood-hungry vermin, thankfully not known for venturing beyond their patch. The thought of the creatures clipping at their heels only serves to encourage them all faster down the slopes.

The higher peaks whisper their invitation as if Jasyn has some invisible tether to the mountain. Perhaps it's because it's the only home she's ever known. Perhaps for more mysterious reasons. Either way, thoughts of Atalanta rear up to slow her down. At intervals, she tells the breeze they're leaving. She tells the breeze about the danger of the vole-rats, in case Atalanta hasn't yet suffered the repeated nightmare.

She doesn't tell the breeze that her heart is breaking. Though the looming storm clouds made exactly for her current state of mind, and the insistent rainfall icing their path, likely does that well enough.

On any other day and circumstance, it would thrill Jasyn to descend through the undulating waves of cloud and into the unknown depths. She's been on the top of the world for so long, wondering what lies beneath.

Had there not been a blizzard accompanying them, she might have looked at the changing landscape and been fascinated by the rock strata and patterns in the ice. If she had been paying more attention, she might have noticed that her parents are familiar with their route. She might have challenged her parents' historical assertions of 'poison' in the lower slopes. Given their previous descriptions of the world below, she would have expected to choke on the mists, to drown in their toxins.

Though, perhaps this emptiness, sickness, and sadness is what poison feels like. But the sensations only worsen when Jasyn thinks further on the notion of never seeing her friend again.

If she weren't so preoccupied, she would have demanded to know whether her parents invented the lie of 'poison' to keep her from venturing far from home. She might have considered whether her parents had good reason. They had, afterall, only ever tried to keep her safe.



After three nights of hunkering down in the nooks of the mountain and three days of Snowdrop's surefooted guidance through snow turned to slush, they reach an elevation qualitatively different to the mountains with which Jasyn is familiar.

In contrast to the peaks of her home, the ground in the distance stretches out flat and snow-scorched, a wasteland entombed in ice. Though it's visually uninviting, at this lower altitude Jasyn finds she can breathe with unfamiliar ease and relief.

Though her stomach remains in knots.

Before she can settle on a more complex emotion than disappointment at this new horizon, she's distracted by her mother gazing out in each direction as if it may hold some crucial answer.

Jasyn's curiosity revives enough to wonder.

A twinkle of hope in her eyes, Rhea places two fingers to her lips and her tuneful whistle takes flight on the wind. When the flutter of sound swirls back to them, she whistles again, this time louder, more insistent.

“It’s been so long, Rhea. It’s possible they’ve not survived.” Chiron arches his brow in sympathy. “Or have moved to pastures new.”

“They’re out there.” Rhea strides on.

“Who’s out there?” Jasyn’s unused voice claws against her throat.

“You’ll see,” says Rhea as she takes the lead, down the pile of scattered rocks; the stairway to the open plains.

ALGID AND SQUALL

Navigating to a sheltered arched rock formation at the base of the mountain, Jasyn's parents dig into the layers of ice. Snowdrop copies, putting his cloven-claw hoofs to use. They must be attempting to create an alcove in which to take refuge should the weather turn. Jasyn selects a flat-edged stone and helps.

Her stone-shovel clunks against something solid.

There's something here. Something her parents are excavating. The hunk of machinery takes shape within the mountainside. They knew this was here. An icy breath escapes Jasyn. It would appear her parents have not always lived in the peaks.

An unusual rhythmic pitter-patter entices Jasyn to turn.

A double flicker interrupts the horizon.

She squints against the cool air for a better look. Her grip about her shovel grows tighter, but her instinct is thrown into question by the smile that lights her mother's face.

"Good grief." Chiron mutters, staring in disbelief as the flickers grow, drawing ever closer.

While her parents embrace in celebration, Jasyn's eyes work to decipher the shapes. Eight legs. Two snouts. Four large, pointed ears. Two creatures galloping at speed and in perfect parallel. The one on the left, white as snow with mottled grey. The right, grey with splashes of silver. Their

manes flowing, long noses angle down as they conquer the terrain. *Captivating.*

Rhea whistles and the creatures readjust their course towards the sound.

Only a few strides away, they slow to a trot, catching their breath in tendrils against the cold. It takes a moment, as if humans and horses cannot believe they're seeing each other, but the gap between them closes and Jasyn's parents reach out to their apparently long-lost friends.

Snowdrop even does a little dance. If it can be called that. Her outbursts are never the most graceful, often requiring any who don't want to be headbutted to step aside. But the new arrivals greet her with a similarly sporadic range of movements, as if they too are old friends.

Aware of the void in her knowledge, Jasyn hangs back. Rhea invites her to place her hand against the grey horse's velvet soft nose and Jasyn experiences the warmth of the creature and the moment. Sadness tugs at her. *If only Atalanta were here to see them too.*

"This is Algid," says Rhea. And, placing Jasyn's other hand on the forehead of the white horse, "This is Squall."

Jasyn hadn't realised how tall a horse would be. Long eyelashes, flecked with snowflakes, protect their deep blue eyes; eyes that are more human in their depth than she might have expected.

A distant roar disturbs humans and horses. Each addresses the horizon, but there's nothing there.

At least, until that nothing shifts and churns.

An ice-storm.

Jasyn has never been out in the wide-open when such a catastrophe is within her orbit. Her stomach flops. Part of her wishes they were back in their cave.

"The Ice King isn't happy today." Chiron frowns at the tumultuous skies.

Good things never happen when her parents utter that phrase.

A sinking sensation accompanies Jasyn's unspoken question of whether this external, fast approaching chaos is anything to do with her. But, judging from her recent experience of uncontrolled ice creation, this is different. Her gut tells her this storm is not of her making.

With both her parents and Snowdrop returning to digging with urgency, Jasyn joins them, keeping her questions for later. If they make it until then.

When the front grille of the ice-locked metal is fully exposed, Rhea opens it and retrieves the components within. The material extends; a double rope with wide loops on each strand, tethered to the mystery machine.

Algid and Squall line up, side by side, as if it's the most natural thing to do. They wait until the loops are placed over their necks, harnessed across their thick shoulders. Once Rhea gives the command, they edge forward, and the metal of the mountain-bound machine groans in protest.

The horizon howls.

Snow-devils scatter and shuffle across the terrain, making their way both closer and further away. Taunting them.

The severity of the approaching storm whisks Jasyn's breath away.

"Help me here, Jasyn." The shiver in Chiron's voice signals his panic as he attempts to dislodge the creaking metal entombed in ice.

Algid and Squall tense against their harnesses. The metal grunts, but the machine remains lodged. They try again, and again, but the groaning metal is fused in place.

The Iolcian weather refuses to be kind. The horizon and its screaming gale close in. *What to do next? How to achieve a better result?* The answer arrives in a sudden—

Thwack—

The arrow punctures the seam of metal and ice, cracking it from deep within.

In quick succession—

Thwack – Thwack—

Jasyn's heart soars. She doesn't even have time to turn before her lost friend is beside her, tugging free the arrows. Shattered from within, the ice crumbles, as Jasyn's insides and enthusiasm piece themselves back together.

It can't be Jasyn's imagination that Atalanta has more scratches on her face than the last time she saw her. The marks suggest she's spent a sleepless night fighting the creatures of the mountain. *Does she want to be here? Or did she have no other choice?*

Rhea and Chiron cannot miss that this stranger is making quick work of assisting them, and that the latest arrival is welcomed by Jasyn's brightened eyes. So instead of passing comment or protest, with no time to dwell, they return to the more pressing task of unearthing buried metal.

With each ice lump removed, its form becomes clearer; the machine is composed of four wheels, each as high as Jasyn's hip. The massive reinforced cabin between the wheels is a mix of metal and glass. It's known as "a mechanised wagon," Chiron informs them. The hidden treasure is a vehicle, one that will shelter them if they can get in before the storm hits.

The snow-devils weave ever closer.

The horses pull again. The metal and mountain murmur until the wagon gasps free, peeling out from under the arch. Attached to the back of the vehicle by a short tether is another wheeled structure, this one lower to the ground but taller and longer.

The storm screeches louder.

In touching distance now.

Shards of ice *sting*.

Rhea and Chiron usher Jasyn and Atalanta into the back of the wagon's cabin and bundle Snowdrop into the front. Jasyn

expects them to follow, but the doors clamp shut, dampening the sounds beyond.

“What are they doing?” Jasyn can only watch as her parents fight against the whipping gale to unharness the horses and lead them past the back of the wagon and into the metal box.

With Algid and Squall enclosed in relative safety, Jasyn’s parents begin the treacherous twenty-foot return journey.

Elemental screams shudder the vehicle.

A mighty snow-devil closes in.

They’re out of time.

Attached to the wagon’s outer shell, a side-mirror quivers in the onslaught. Jasyn squints, deciphering movement between lashing blasts of blizzard. Her parents anchor themselves against the wagon, retreating back towards the mountain arch.

Daggers of ice swoop past the windows.

Jasyn’s breath catches in her throat. Needing her parents to be safe, she reaches for the door, but it won’t budge. Snowdrop murmurs protest.

They must have locked it. Or the increasing swirl of the snow-devil is forcing it shut. She scrambles closer to the window, squinting at the shapes in the side-mirror, desperate to decipher whether they’ve made it. She thumps the glass with her palm, crackling a thin film of ice within the carriage. Her breath hits the frigid air in heavy plumes.

As the devil passes over them, the wagon lifts as though a greater power is pulling at invisible strings.

Jasyn grips the blanket-padded seat, sparking a sharp ice-web across the material. It prickles and burns her palms, but she can’t stop. The more she panics, the more the ice grabs hold. Even her own breaths weigh sharp in her chest, threatening to impale her from within.

The water in her breath takes mid-air angular form.

The storm is meant to be outside, not inside.

Wishing the universe would be quiet and everything would go away, Jasyn closes her eyes. Her terror dissipates only when Atalanta places her palm to the back of her hand, her thumb tracing a calming pattern.

Ears ringing, Jasyn opens her eyes to find Atalanta gazing at her. If she looks away she fears she'll discover Atalanta is nothing but a conjuring of her imagination, an apparition borne of exhaustion, stress and hope.

It's difficult to know for sure what messages exist in someone else's eyes, but as Atalanta presses her forehead to Jasyn's and Jasyn basks in the all-encompassing warm Transonic glow, she deciphers it as: *No matter the chaos, we're in this together.*

The sharpness in Jasyn's chest thaws.

As the snow-devil hugs the mountainside, skirting over them, a sense of calm drifts in the eye of the storm, while hand in hand, forehead to forehead, Jasyn and Atalanta wait for the storm to pass.



Under a blanket of fresh snow, unable to see out, and with the door frozen shut, Jasyn and Atalanta kick from within. With a heavy crunch-thud, the door gives.

With a deep breath, Jasyn leads the way.

Through deep snow powder and sharp ice-nuggets, Snowdrop ploughs a path and they wade to the horse box. Jasyn hesitates at the already open door. What will she do if it's empty?

Algid and Squall block her view. They blink at her and there's nothing to suggest they're damaged or ruffled. *Just another day in the Iolcian plains, apparently.*

Stepping around them, Jasyn finds her parents crouched over something. It takes a moment for her mind to catch up to

what her eyes are seeing; that her parents are not only alive, but intact.

Sunshine bursts in her chest, followed by curiosity.

Her parents' focus is on Rhea's backpack and its contents; in particular, a burgundy cloth-covered item that Jasyn can't quite see. It seems to be a dull metal, but when Jasyn steps closer, they swaddle the item and bundle it away. What it is, and why they're checking on it at a time like this, are questions that would ordinarily be at the forefront of Jasyn's mind.

But, in this moment, she cares only about wrapping her arms around her parents and telling them never to leave her behind again.

MECHANISED MONSTER

At the front of the wagon, Rhea heaves a slab of ice into what Jasyn assumes must be the engine. Within the cabin, Chiron reaches for the ignition, wincing and clutching his side as he does so. Rhea calls out to check he's okay, but he waves it away, telling her it's "nothing a bit of time won't heal." Everyone's attention is caught by pistons turning under the hatch and ice converting to steam in a roaring blue glow. Her parents' relief at the engine's functionality is soon choked by the shudder of the engine defiantly cutting out.

As if they knew this would happen, Algid and Squall trot out, ready.

"Thank the heavens we have backup horsepower," says Rhea, ruffling the fur on Algid's neck.

Once the horses are harnessed and the reins fed through the dash, Rhea takes her place in the driver's seat. With a tug of the reins, their journey across the snow-plains begins.

Whether it's an unspoken understanding that she helped save them from the elements, that they can sense and understand her shadow of grief, or that they suspect Jasyn will whip up a storm of her own creation otherwise, her parents don't question Atalanta's presence. It is accepted, without fuss, that she will accompany them.

Though they're not subtle when trying to steal glances at her in the rear-view mirror. They probably have one or two questions. Jasyn has known her for four sun-orbits and has a

thousand unanswered questions herself. Or perhaps, having been mountain hermits, they've never seen Transonics before.

If that's the case, Jasyn wishes they'd be a bit *cooler* about it.

Inwardly, Jasyn beams. Her lost friend found her.

"Where are we going?" Jasyn asks, patting Snowdrop's coarse fur and hoping the extraordinary circumstances allows her at least some insight into the state of things.

"We'll find out when we get there," says Rhea. "Until then, we keep moving."

Jasyn sighs. *That wasn't illuminating in the slightest.* She's twelve sun-orbits old and can tell that's not a winning strategy. Why won't they treat her like a grown-up? She's not stupid, though she might act it sometimes.

"How do you know which way to go?"

"We follow the water, and we'll find what we're looking for," Rhea imparts mysteriously.

What are we looking for? should be Jasyn's first question, but in her frustration she blurts: "What water? There's nothing of anything around here."

A little embarrassed by her flushed cheeks and outburst, Jasyn's eyes flicker to Atalanta. She follows Atalanta's observant line of sight to the side of the wagon. There, the vaguest ribbon of turquoise flows several measures beneath the thickened ice.

Oh, that water.

But embarrassment at her own petulance is overshadowed by something else.

In the four sun-orbits Jasyn and Atalanta have been discovering their own and each other's personalities, Jasyn has found it takes Atalanta time to relax, but when she does she becomes more animated.

But now, the animation, the light, has gone.

Where once there was one Transonic behind her right ear, now there is one behind her left ear, too. Losing a mother and gaining a Transonic hardly seems a fair trade.

Happiness at her friend's arrival is dulled by the sombre silence. Sorrow and guilt congeal in her gut. No matter how much she wishes she could, she can't undo what happened up in the mountains. Only time can heal, but scars will always remain.

How Jasyn wishes they could skip forward to a time when Atalanta is happy.

The dark clouds prompt Rhea to press a switch on the dash. Yellow headlamps pierce the grey, highlighting the expanse of nothing before them. Chiron says something about the dynamo being in working order despite the engine not being up to muster, but Jasyn is too dumbfounded by her own thoughts to enquire about how this moving shelter works.

Snowdrop snoring against her knees, Jasyn gazes out at the frozen Iolcian plains. Her whole life, her questions about the world beyond the peaks have been met with evasion and silence. She had learned to stop asking, but never stopped wondering. If they had told her how bland the lands beneath the clouds are, it might have axed her interest in the bud. At least the Unforgiving Mountains had the initiative to form a range of irregular shapes to prickle the skyline. The plains are... unforgivably flat. Only the occasional dead-wood copse or boulder-mound interrupts the monotony.

Perhaps the weather whips into a frenzy now and then to balance out the boring landscape.

"This is where you used to live?" Jasyn asks, with a hint of disbelief, trying to fathom the idea that her parents, who fear everything, lived in a place so meteorologically treacherous. Perhaps that is why they left.

She doesn't miss the shared look between her parents, as if each seeks permission from the other. She's getting a little fed up of looks that speak of secrecy.

“This is where we lived, before you were born. We travelled the plains, from village to village, taming horses.” Rhea watches Jasyn’s reaction in the rear-view mirror.

It hadn’t occurred to Jasyn that her parents had a life before her, let alone a different one. Of course, it makes sense, now that she thinks about it.

“It didn’t always look like this,” Chiron explains, sensing her bafflement. “When your mother and I were young, there was greenery to be found.”

“Is the weather why you left?”

A distant grumble tenses the wagon.

Snowdrop snorts awake, her crossed-eyes blinking. She’s already on her feet, ready for battle.

Nose to the window, Jasyn seeks evidence of an approaching storm, but finds only a trail of jagged shapes with blazing headlamps interrupting the flat.

With a wince, Chiron reaches from the passenger seat to the headlamp switch.

“Chiron, no.” Rhea grasps his hand. “They’ll have already seen us. If we switch off the lights now, they’ll know we’re hiding.”

“What else can we do?” Chiron whispers, as though in the back seat they can’t hear him.

“We stay on the track, in plain sight. That’s what someone with nothing to hide would do.” Rhea’s voice wavers.

What do we have to hide? Jasyn wants to ask, but is silenced by Chiron gesturing for her and Atalanta to “get up, get up, quick.”

He pulls aside the layers of blankets from the back seat to unveil the previously concealed storage box. Not knowing what it is they should be afraid of, but heartbeats elevating and hands shaking all the same, Jasyn and Atalanta follow Chiron’s directions and climb into the box together.

They're small enough to fit, even with some space, but the muffled sounds of blankets piling on top puts Jasyn in mind of being trapped in an avalanche.

Atalanta's Transonics warm their faces. The orange glow lights up the galaxies in her eyes like flames. Their bodies pressed together, arms and legs a tangle, Jasyn wiggles to get comfortable, but all she manages is an odd and delightful discomfort. With Atalanta solid and soft beneath her, her breath whispering against her, Jasyn's cheeks blaze hotter than the Seven Suns. Or thereabouts.

It's not long before a thunderous tirade roars around the wagon, resonating with familiarity, like an unwelcome dream...

Atalanta flinches to touch the top edges of her Transonics, dimming the illumination further. The sounds must be too much. Jasyn's focus should be on the cacophony of grinding and growling outside, but she has never before been close enough to observe the details of Atalanta's mouth. In the lowered light, Atalanta's lips aren't dissimilar to the shape of the bow she carries. Her parted lips are full, and Jasyn wonders what they would feel like against her own. She's sure she shouldn't be thinking about such new and confusing things when potential chaos surrounds them, but it's a welcome distraction.

Happiness and sadness and fear and excitement churn in Jasyn's thoughts. Happiness that her friend is here with her. Sadness about what happened in the mountains and the ongoing effect it will have on her friend. Fear of the mysterious threat beyond the wagon. Fear and excitement at what might happen if she leans closer and places her lips against Atalanta's, and what that might do to the trajectory of their friendship.

From the off-limits info banks of the Shard, Jasyn has learnt that placing your mouth against someone else's is what people do when they both feel a certain way. Jasyn had thought it strange when she first encountered the idea...

But now? Pressed together with a jumble of emotions and heat coursing through her, has her all for experiencing such strangeness.

Does Atalanta feel the same?

The glow in her eyes suggests she might, but that could just be the lowered light of her Transonics and Jasyn's wishful thinking. Her quickened breaths mirror Jasyn's own, but the unknown threat beyond the wagon is the likely trigger.

Jasyn strains to listen. Whatever's out there, it's powerful, or there are a lot of them.

An odd mix of safe and scared has her heart pounding. That Atalanta's hand rises to Jasyn's chest, to where her heart is, has her pulse tripping over itself. *Does she feel the same? Or is she letting you know "Your heart is too loud"?*

If they're about to die, or if something is about to force them apart, now might be her only chance...

Jasyn leans a little closer. She doesn't rush because there's only one opportunity for a first experience like this. And the last thing she wants is to startle Atalanta.

Their lips will touch, and Atalanta's sadness will be forgotten, if only for a moment. Their mouths will meet, and Atalanta will know the depth of Jasyn's feelings. Somehow Jasyn will communicate everything through that kiss.

It's a lot of pressure to put on one kiss.

Atalanta is leaning too, isn't she?

Jasyn's heart hammers with happiness. But as their lips are about to touch, Atalanta retreats. The moment shatters and Jasyn's chest aches as if something inside her has broken, too.

With Atalanta's face turned from her, Jasyn has full view of vole-rat scratches to her jawline and the newly acquired Transonic tucked behind her ear. Dialled down, only embers of orange pulse through the linear circuitry-veins. It's a glowing reminder of claws and teeth. Life and death.

Silence hangs like a ravine between them.

Are the machinations of vehicles growing more distant? Or does Jasyn just care less right now?

Of course she rejected you. You're the reason her mother is dead. You're the reason she had to stray from her home. You've uprooted her life with death.

An apology could never be enough, but it's something... isn't it? Fumbling in cramped conditions, Jasyn manoeuvres her arms free to sign.

"What happened in the mountains..." she begins, but Atalanta grasps her hands, stopping her mid-speech.

The cut on Jasyn's palm still fresh, the insistent gesture hurts. With the clench of her jaw, she buries the pain.

"I can't talk about that," signs Atalanta, tears and fire in her eyes.

The tears tumble sideways along Atalanta's cheeks and Jasyn wants to catch them and make them go away, but Atalanta angles further from her.

Tears prickle Jasyn's eyes. Everything that happened... and everything since... is all her fault. If she had been more careful, Atalanta's mother would still be alive. A mountain bear wouldn't be mourning its cub. They would have no knowledge of the creatures lurking within their orbit. The Shard would be intact, and the mountains would still be their home.

Being pressed close to Jasyn must be the last thing Atalanta wants right now, and here she is forced to occupy the same space.

Hot tears scour Jasyn's cheeks. She tries to swipe them away before they drip, but her arms are busy trying to hold herself away from Atalanta, to give her the space she needs.

A tear splashing down Atalanta's cheek causes her to look up. Jasyn squeezes her eyes shut, not wanting to see whatever spirit-crushing emotion haunts Atalanta's features. Only a short while ago, the threat of the weather had brought them into each other's orbit. Jasyn had seen a promise in Atalanta's

eyes. *Them against the universe.* Had that been her imagination? A conspiracy of hope and wishful thinking?

The palm pressing to Jasyn's back has her arms buckling and her body landing on Atalanta. Arms wrap around her, palms pressing soothing circles into her back and encouraging her to take refuge in the nook of Atalanta's neck. It is then Jasyn understands: *She might hold me responsible. She might have rejected me. But she'll still be there.*

At that, Jasyn's tears run more freely.

As their tears combine, rain dapples against the wagon roof, its sound reaching down through the blanket layers. And as Jasyn tries to refocus her thoughts on external rather than inner turmoil, the blanket box lid opens.

CHILLING DAYS - FROZEN NIGHTS

Beyond Snowdrop peering down at them, the pale face of Chiron does the same as he lets them loose from the box. Swiping away her tears, Jasyn cranes to observe the source of the fading sounds: the overbearing convoy of armoured vehicles disappearing towards the sunset.

Her parents must assume Jasyn and Atalanta's tears are from fright and the unsettling circumstances, because they don't question them. Rhea merely repeats the phrase, "It's okay. We're okay," as if trying to convince herself as much as them.

Her expression sombre, Atalanta stares out the window, scanning the horizon for unknown threats, or just not wanting to look at Jasyn.

Disquiet pumps hot and cold through Jasyn's veins.

The skies grumble.

Rhea and Chiron grimace. Their subconscious glance in Jasyn's direction lets her know *they know* her connection to the weather.

There are too many questions in Jasyn's mind right now, too many feelings and confusions vying for attention. With no idea what to do with the tangle, she pulls at the thread at the forefront of her mind.

"Why were we hiding?"

They deserve an answer to this, at least.

“It’s difficult to know who your friends are in this world,” says Rhea.

That will not do.

“What does that mean? What were they?” demands Jasyn, gesturing in the direction of the convoy.

A familiar silence follows, and her frustration builds.

The fractious skies respond.

“Not *what*. *Who*,” says Chiron. “They are the Ice King’s guards. On patrol.”

“They’re people? Like us?” asks Jasyn.

When Rhea nods, Jasyn tightens her jaw so it won’t drop to the metal floor. Discovering Atalanta in the mountains had been a welcome shock. Atalanta’s mother had been a logical, but altogether unfortunate, revelation. Now, Jasyn’s mind has to make room for the idea of many more occupants in this world.

What do they patrol for? Why are they a threat to us? What does the Ice King have to do with anything? Of the many questions storming her thoughts, Jasyn repeats:

“Why were we hiding?”

Rhea’s gaze levels with hers.

“Please understand. We only ever wanted to protect you.” She looks to Chiron, an unspoken question to which he nods. “Now that we’re here, it’s important you know: citizens of these lands, of Iolcus, we are all required by law to be Tallied.”

Rhea offers her wrist. As she presses down beneath her thumb joint, a stripe of blue light appears across her skin. Chiron does the same, a shimmer decorating his flesh.

What is that?

Jasyn and Atalanta press their own wrists, but find nothing. They compare and each try again, but there’s no light. Snowdrop idly watches on from her nest of floor blankets.

“Resources are sparse, as you can see,” says Rhea, indicating the... well, everything... or lack of anything. “The Ice King decided it would be best for the population to be...” she searches for the right word, “...managed.”

“By order of the Ice King, citizens wanting to have children may do so only if they have Permits.” Chiron frowns. “Permits we do not possess.”

“Why not?”

“My little mountain bear...”

Jasyn loves and hates in equal measure when her mother calls her that. Right now, the last thing she wants to think of is a *mountain bear*. Nor does she want to be patronised.

All she wants are answers.

“...Permits are only granted in certain circumstances. And you, my Jasyn, fall outside those. The Ice King and his officials would not have allowed it, so we didn’t ask.” Rhea’s frown echoes the stress in her eyes. “Please know that this makes you special. And you are everything to us.”

“But it also means our lives depend on being careful,” Chiron interjects, shifting uncomfortably.

“Is that why Atalanta was up in the mountains, too?” asks Jasyn.

“I think your friend is best placed to answer that,” says Rhea.

Atalanta’s always alert eyes watch them, absorbing this new information, but after a moment’s consideration, she returns to staring at the white and grey desolate landscape.

“It’s possible, I suppose,” continues Rhea, with a half-smile of sympathy.

“What happens to people who don’t have Permits?” asks Jasyn.

The question hangs there for a moment too long. Even Snowdrop looks to Rhea and Chiron, as if for the answer.

“The Ice King has ruled that they have not been *Permitted* to live, and therefore...” she looks away from Jasyn, “...they cease to do so.”

Cease? “You mean he kills them? He’d kill us?”

Atalanta scowls at this unwelcome information. Jasyn concurs with the sentiment.

“His guards would, yes.” Chiron’s voice is a whisper.

Not only were they hiding in the blanket box, but they’d been hiding in the mountains, too? Jasyn gapes at her parents for a while before asserting: “No.”

“No?” asks Rhea.

“No,” repeats Jasyn. “That’s not right. He’s wrong. *They* are wrong.”

“It’s the way it is,” says Chiron. “That is why we must live a quiet life.”

“Always hiding?” says Jasyn. *It’s hardly living, is it?*

Rhea grasps Jasyn by the shoulders, startling her. “Jasyn, you need to listen. Do what we say. It won’t be like it was up in the mountains. People down here are all trying to survive. For us to do so, we need to stay out of their way.”

Only once Jasyn nods does Rhea loosens her grip.

“That was why we lived in the mountains?” Jasyn’s voice is quiet.

A moment passes before her mother answers:

“Yes, my darling. That is why.”



With night falling, the dull and darkening plains pass as the wagon conquers the terrain one horse-drawn wheel turn at a time, and Jasyn can’t help her attention from drifting skyward.

Stars blink down, identical to up in the mountains. The Astro-pyxis, the fixed eye of the mountain bear constellation,

watches over all of them.

You knew all this was down here, Jasyn says, silently, to the cosmic mountain bear. She had hoped there would be more to life than the mountains. And she isn't an idiot. She knew her parents were keeping something from her.

But this?

That there's an entire world down here, that it is twisted by an Ice King, and she doesn't have a place in it? That's a lot of *something* to have kept hidden.

They lied to keep me safe, Jasyn reminds herself as the wagon hazards through the twilight.

It's not long before she discovers the Iolcian plains are not immune to the Night Freeze. The howling inflections of the winds, without natural landmarks to slow them, scream icicles across the wagon's exterior.

How Algid and Squall exist in its wake is a source of worry and admiration. As night stumbles over them, they are let loose. The horse box is left open for them, but the creatures wander off in search of their own shelter. They've survived a lifetime out here, so are best placed to choose how to continue to do so. They disappear, only to return the next morning to Rhea's summoning whistle.

For two chilling days and frozen nights, the wagon follows the subterranean ice-topped river. In this time, Jasyn learns first-hand that the monotonous boredom of the desolate open plains can be thrown into sharp terror by the unannounced arrival of snow-devils and spouts, spiralling from the sky and ripping into the landscape in uncertain paths. She learns that food foraging without a Shard can be literally fruitless, even when Snowdrop is trying her best. And she discovers Atalanta's ability to stretch conversational silence beyond the horizon.

It breaks Jasyn's heart to have her friend within reach but feel so distant. But when they fall asleep, she gravitates to Jasyn, nestling against her, rekindling the flames, hope and confusion.

At least they have each other. No matter how complex that relationship might be. Even if communicating is currently beyond them.

“Hail, Chiron.”

Jasyn stirs at Rhea’s scolding voice. Atalanta, too, retreating to her side of the wagon, much to Jasyn’s silent regret.

As Jasyn gains her waking bearings, observing her parents in fraught conversation in the front of the wagon, is it her imagination or does her father’s skin look ashen? It could just be their lacklustre surroundings.

Rhea lifts aside his jacket and Chiron winces.

“Your injury, it’s infected. You said nothing.” The ripped and blood darkened fabric would suggest the storm got him. The hail within the snow-devil had been sharp.

“It’ll heal,” he protests with a forehead too sheened with sweat to be convincing.

“For hail’s sake, Chiron. You can be an idiot sometimes.” Rhea’s words are harsh, but her eyes are a mix of kindness and worry.

Chiron shivers. “It just needs time.”

“Time is the last thing it needs,” says Rhea, making quick work of directing Jasyn and Atalanta to heat snow and sieve it to rid it of impurities while she battles his fever with a snow-drenched scarf to his forehead. Once the wound is cleaned and stitched, they’re on their way, but the tension in Rhea’s jaw remains; Chiron’s shivers do, too.

“We cannot continue like this,” she says, mostly to herself.

The further they travel along the blue ribbon of river, the thinner the ice becomes. Once they reach the point where the water trail emerges into vague sunshine, the terrain offers a more varied selection of altitudes. There are no mountains, but there are hills and a single rocky outcrop. It is here, where the ground glistens, that the voyagers happen across a small collection of buildings decorating the distance.

Rhea halts the horses.

Chiron shudders in his sleep, his skin an unfortunate heat source, his wound leaking unwelcome colours on his shirt.

“Do we need to hide?” asks Jasyn.

“My mother told me to steer clear of Iolcians,” signs Atalanta, suspicious of the populated horizon, her fingers digging into the blanket she’d nestled under. A flicker of eye contact lets Jasyn know to translate. “We lived in the peaks because she said no Iolcian would be foolish enough to make their home in the mountains.”

Well... Indeed, thinks Jasyn as she relays the information and seeks her mother’s reaction to the not-so-veiled insults. Rhea offers a tight-lipped smile, but one with a squint of curiosity.

“She said they don’t take kindly to sky folk,” Atalanta signs, her hands quaking from hunger or fear.

Sky folk?!

Well, that makes Atalanta even more fascinating than Jasyn thought possible. *Why hasn’t she shared this information before?*

“Where in the skies are you from?” asks Jasyn, risking the question, but Atalanta’s nervous gaze is focused on the potential threat on the horizon.

How frustrating. A glimpse of something spectacular, only for it to be hidden away. Jasyn can only hope she soon learns the skill of patience, because this is torture.

“This world used to be more accepting.” Rhea nods, her brow serious.

It could be because her father is shuddering through a fever dream, but for the first time in Jasyn’s life her mother asks her opinion. It’s clear they need medicine, food. Things they cannot currently provide themselves.

It takes some discussion – and a part-fabricated tale that involves never having lived in the mountains, nor having originated from the skies; instead, being travelling horse

tamers – but over the course of a meandering conversation, they agree on the way forward.

Flicking the reins, Rhea adjusts their course, heading for the village on the horizon.

As they approach populated terrain, Jasyn and Atalanta are schooled and quizzed on the reinvented story of their lives. Rhea imparts how to share only enough of the truth to be believable. It crosses Jasyn's mind that her mother is adept at shaping truth, and wonders if this means something she should think on further, but approaching a strange village is not the time for in-depth explorations of authenticity.

As the village nears, Jasyn places a calming palm over Atalanta's unsettled hand. And whether the *travelling horse tamers* will be welcomed or chased away, or something altogether more final, only time will tell.

PART II

ICE LUMP

CHASING TIME

Ten sun-orbits later...

Jasyn's feet navigate around the roots. A single wrong step, a broken twig, that's all it'll take to give her away.

As silently as she's able, she flits between the black and silver trunks of the Glowing Woods. So named after the fruit of the filament trees, objectively beautiful but nutritionally obsolete, that offer a lingering luminosity after sunset. Right now, in the lacklustre daylight, the triangular fruits are uninviting and unremarkable.

Closing her eyes, Jasyn pauses. Her fingers test the tension in the air, the caress of hovering moisture, seeking any ripples, any clues as to the direction of her pursuer. The air is thick, as if she could swim through it, *if that weren't a ridiculous idea*.

The stillness offers nothing. It's enough to make her consider she's being pursued by a ghost.

Thwack—

An arrow lodges in a tree, impossibly close above Jasyn's head.

Her startled exhalation hits the air in an ice-cloud. She punches through it as she launches into a sprint, weaving between trees as though trailing an invisible string, tying it in knots.

Faster and faster, she races towards the daylight and snow-decorated fields. The pillars of trees at the woodland edge present a prison-bar vista. Which is ironic. Running through

these woods, the ice air in her lungs, Jasyn's senses are liberated. Her figure lithe, her body strong from climbing anything her surroundings have to offer. She conquers obstacles and maintains her sprint.

A few strides from the boundary.

All she has to do is get beyond the tree line.

Jasyn's heart leaps. She might just do it.

She glances over her shoulder at the precise moment her pursuer descends from the canopy. So silent. So sudden.

She lands with an *Oof!* in the powdered snow before she realises what's happened. Her vision swims as her mind catches up, her body weighed down. The warmth of therma-stones pushes against her hip from her pocket. Though it's not only their heat trickling through her.

When her vision focuses, beyond a bold patchwork of blue and green, she finds a mechanical bow worn like a sash atop a quiver of arrows, and Atalanta grinning down at her, that undying intelligent sparkle in her eyes.

Much has changed in the past ten sun-orbits, but Atalanta's mischief and Jasyn's elation when they play chase has not. Perhaps they should have grown out of such games by now. Or perhaps being a grown-up is about deciding what that means for themselves.

Jasyn grumbles in faux annoyance. Her graphite grey trousers and off-white collared long-sleeve peeking out from her mottled woollen over-shirt should have blended her with their surroundings. Atalanta's comparatively vibrant blues and greens, in stark contrast to the palette of the currently inert Glowing Woods, should have given her away. And yet she'd managed to keep hidden until the last possible moment.

Some days Jasyn triumphs, but she has her suspicions that she only 'wins' when Atalanta lets her. Today – half in the woods, half out – is, according to Atalanta, a draw and, "Better luck next time."

Her heart hammering, giddy glee thrumming through her veins, Jasyn turns the tables, clutching Atalanta by the waist

and rolling her into the snow, pinning her. Jasyn's grin of victory is short-lived as Atalanta uses the same momentum to roll Jasyn, pressing her down with her whole body.

Oh, hail. The universe is so unfair.

Atalanta's shock of black hair flops forward into a tufty fringe. A green-hazed halo surrounds her head, which is either Jasyn's imagination running riot, or the Corinthian Moon looming in the sky.

The particulars of the celestial Corinthian threat, encroaching on the sparse Iolcian sunlight, are the furthest thing from Jasyn's mind as she attempts to wriggle free. In truth, her hands grasped, her body warmed, Atalanta's breath against her cheek, Jasyn is exactly where she wants to be. The thought sends a tingle through her. Her cheeks ignite, refusing to cool, even with the gentle sprinkle of snow kissing her skin.

Those eyes smile down at her. Blues, greens and bursts of yellow all vying for position, like an aurora in the night sky. The galaxies pulsing in Atalanta's irises used to inspire in Jasyn the thrill of adventure. Now those emotions have evolved into something *more*. Or perhaps it's the intensity and her understanding that have evolved.

Though *understanding* isn't the right word, as it's all far too confusing. She's fairly certain friendship doesn't involve wondering what it would feel like to be the snow against Atalanta's cheek.

It would be so easy to close the space between them and invite Atalanta's mouth to hers. It would be as simple as leaning forward... Isn't that what Atalanta's eyes are asking her to do? Or is the smile teasing Atalanta's lips merely questioning why her strange friend is staring at her like that?

Jasyn has travelled across mountains and treacherous Iolcian ice-fields, scaled cliff faces and leapt between boulders, but travelling a mere breath closer to her friend and telling her how she thinks of her when she closes her eyes, is an impossible voyage.

While Atalanta is the only person Jasyn can be herself around, Jasyn's amorous inclinations ignite in herself a certain panic that she may upset the balance of their friendship.

She's already pulled away once before.

The last thing Jasyn wants is to make Atalanta uncomfortable, even if that means she herself exists in a constant state of angst. She's not sure she could cope if the perfect snow crystal of their friendship were to melt.

The snowfall stutters.

If there's one problem with having an inexplicable power of ice, it's that it puts on show emotions that may not be for sharing.

Cheeks growing hotter than the Seven Suns, Jasyn averts her eyes, which Atalanta takes as a cue to spring to her feet, push her ruffled hair out of her eyes, and offer a helping hand. The pressure of her touch stems up Jasyn's forearm to permeate every part of her.

Jasyn reclaims her hand, clears her throat in a universally awkward fashion, and focuses on brushing the snow powder off her back and legs. That Atalanta steps in to assist does no favours for Jasyn's ability to breathe, nor does it defuse the blush in her cheeks. Her attempts to hide behind the waves of her asymmetrical dull-blond hair – one side cropped close to her scalp, the other more free-flowing – are unsuccessful, thanks to the unsettled breeze.

And so, as they head out across the snowfield with gathered sacks of firewood and buckets of foraged frost-berries, whether Atalanta is aware of Jasyn's galaxy of feelings and whether they are returned remains, as it always has, an almighty mystery.

ICE LUMP

The vague sun warming them, Jasyn and Atalanta head down from the copse, following the sliver of river towards the village affectionately or otherwise known as Ice Lump.

Its smallholdings form a patchwork of brown and green amongst the snow, as produce attempts to heave its way out of the earth. The clean-cut domes of icehouses interrupt the shabbier shapes of shacks and stone-built cottages. The village looks defiant, but shaken. The ice has crept in over time, making its way between the gaps in the stone and mortar. Expanding and contracting, over and over, tugging at each building and fusing it in place, ice both rips this place apart and holds it together.

It's as if even the village has been trying to break free from itself.

While Jasyn is thankful that she, her parents and Atalanta have managed to live a quiet village life, the question of what lies beyond the horizon forever clips at her heels. The over-familiarity of her surroundings and routine – her perpetual mission to gather food and entice crops to grow in unfavourable conditions – has made her restless. She misses being up in the clouds. This place, through no fault of its own, is so... flat. If it weren't for the Glowing Wood trees and the rocky out-crop allowing her to exercise her enthusiasm for defying gravity, she would have left several sun-orbits ago.

If taking to the skies were a possibility, Jasyn would have leapt at the chance. But the universe's enthusiasm for irony

saw to it that the Ice King closed the skies in the same sun-orbit Jasyn emerged from the mountains.

But there's still an entire planet out there.

She's learned to be wary of adventure, but there's no escaping her craving for the unknown. At least if she's out there in the world, she'll be able to seek out the difference between fact and fiction, uninhibited by her parents' filtering of the truth.

With preparations almost complete, for herself leaving and for those she's leaving behind, she's ready. Tomorrow, before first light, she'll be gone.

No one knows. Not even Atalanta.

All Jasyn has to do now is pluck up the courage to tell her.

"What is it?" signs Atalanta, and it takes Jasyn a couple of uneasy breaths to realise she's probably not referring to her unsettled emotional landscape, but the curl of metal wire Jasyn had unthinkingly liberated from the snow-dappled ground.

With an eye for homing in on interesting objects, Jasyn has a habit of collecting the odds and ends she discovers on her daily roaming. A sharp-edged flint. A rope-like mat of tangle-weeds. The villagers generally appreciate her offerings, though are often unable to foresee their uses until she points them out. The shape of this metal, it could pin her travelling carry-sack shut.

Atalanta's light scowl suggests she's aware something's up. Jasyn's plan to leave has been simmering away for several sun-orbits, but the fear of Atalanta's rejection, that she won't want to join her, has delayed her and made her secretive.

Now. She could ask her now.

Jasyn opens her mouth, uncertain which version of her speech will emerge. She's rehearsed so many in her mind, each with a different starting point and thread, that they've all turned to tangle-weeds in her panicked thoughts.

"A golden day," calls out a local, buckling the moment. "Never can trust the forecast, eh?"

Jasyn offers the required smile and wave to the passer-by.

“It’s nothing,” she signs to Atalanta, inwardly grimacing at her own scrambled thoughts and fears. “There’s something I wanted to get your thoughts on in the icehouse.” *Yes, changing the subject. That achieves precisely nothing.*

Atalanta nods, but her scowl remains. Perhaps it’s clearer than Corinth is sickly green that there’s something on Jasyn’s mind. Perhaps Atalanta isn’t keen on entering the village today. Either way, in companionable – albeit semi-torturous – silence, they continue along the mist-hazed river in the timid but shimmering sunshine.

Often when she’s with Atalanta, the clouds are fluffier, the air is warmer, and even the ice around them thaws. Though she might try to convince herself that such things are in her mind – with the last few sun-orbits of villagers describing the weather as ‘unseasonably warm’ – the building intensity of her feelings for Atalanta appears to be in direct correlation with the developments in the weather.

As if it isn’t enough that she thinks herself responsible for the dire outcome after charging head-first into the deadly caves up in the mountains, hindsight has her questioning whether she’s doubly responsible for the events in the peaks by waking the mountain bears from their ‘eternal’ hibernation in the first place.

There’s the distinct possibility that the parted ice-clouds and subsequent sunshine in the mountains had been an overflow from Jasyn’s inner landscape. Her happiness had blazed brighter thanks to Atalanta. It’s a bittersweet notion that her happiness may have caused Atalanta’s greatest sorrow.

She shoves the thought down, not ready and certain she never will be, to fully process it. It’s not as if Atalanta will ever talk about it. It’s not as if Jasyn expects forgiveness. Which leaves her with churning thoughts and the task of repressing her inner and outer blizzard.

The skies crackle.

“A little fractious today, Jasyn?” says Ani, the proprietor of the Drinking Den, as Jasyn and Atalanta pass.

“Sorry?” Jasyn turns but doesn’t stop.

Having lived in the village now for ten of her twenty-two sun-orbits, she’s aware that hers is a difference she must keep hidden. There are some days when, to her, the link between herself and the weather is clear, others when it’s blatantly obvious and, honestly, a little on the nose. But then there are days when it’s a puzzle whether she is the cause of rain and hail or, well, *it’s just the weather*.

Though she may not have deciphered the exact logic or science of the link between her emotions and the weather, the snow-globe of her feelings is something she is learning to control. Mostly.

“The weather.” Ani points to the sky. “The Ice King obviously can’t decide on what it should be today.” It had been strange for Jasyn to discover that the Ice King is a real person occupying a distant throne, and not just a figure of speech.

She nods agreement. If there’s one thing Iolcians thrive on, it’s talking about the weather.

Ani scratches his beard and heads into his own establishment, a place where one too many potato-spirits can lead to the telling of tales. “Oh,” he says, peeking back out, “Hera’s got a break in one of her panes.”

“Heading there after an errand,” Jasyn calls back.

With a grin and a salute-wave of thanks, Ani disappears into his den.

Jasyn pauses to check on Atalanta. Where possible, Atalanta keeps her distance from the village and its people (Jasyn not included) like a satellite in orbit. People are not her thing. Small talk and the threat of her cheek being pinched by a passing local (Atalanta would rather be prodded with a pitchfork) is the most likely trigger for her to disappear into the ether.

And today is no different.

It often strikes Jasyn as odd that Atalanta is the one who wants to fade into the background, and yet she wears comparatively brighter clothing. It's odder still that when she makes an escape, that clothing doesn't give her away.

Looking every which way along the ice-cobbled streets, there's no sign of her.



The shop bell *ting-a-lings* as Jasyn steps in from the outside cold, into the inside chill. This is the one venue in which the sub-zero is welcome, serving as a brick-building cool box.

"You need to get more meat on your bones, Jasyn." The comment from the butcher is possibly meant to be neighbourly, but Jasyn has never been able to read her gruff tone. When someone wields a knife and doesn't seem to care about being covered in blood and guts, it can colour interactions an uncomfortable crimson.

The butcher, at least, has never suffered from doting on Jasyn. She hardly appreciates her own child, so why would she bother with someone else's?

Jasyn shrugs away her discomfort with a smile.

"You look like you're having a bad day," says the butcher. *Rude*. "Well, you know what they say. The worst day on Iolcus is better than the best day on Corinth."

Jasyn smiles politely. She's not sure what that means exactly; it's one of those platitudes people like to say around here.

The butcher disappears into the back of the shop and Jasyn shivers. It could be the array of slaughtered crows dangling from meat hooks and staring dead-eyed at her, but this place gives her the creeps.

"WHO WILL SURVIVE?" booms a tinny voice from the back room, unleashed by the half-open door. Jasyn cranes to look.

On the wall, an ice-screen blares advert footage of a gladiatorial arena. The screen is bigger than any Jasyn has seen in Ice Lump. Butchery must pay well.

Gladiators form an impressive line-up, all armour, flesh and athleticism. The show title blasts through, announcing: “THE GAMES” as the roar of the stadium crowd, the gladiatorial armour, and the slick graphics all combine to underscore an event a thousand measures removed from village life. Which, in terms of distance travelled to its Ice City origins, is probably about right.

The butcher’s boy, Peleus, older than Jasyn by a couple of sun-orbits, is so focused on the screen that his mouth hangs half-open, his axe-knife lingering mid-air. He appears to be buffering. He only notices his mother’s arrival when he gets a solid cuff across the ear.

“Pay attention, boy. Never mind losing your fingers, your eyes will turn to lumps of ice if you keep staring at that screen.”

Peleus responds with a surly snarl, but only when his mother’s back is turned. With the door still open, Jasyn catches his eye and offers a half-smile of sympathy, but in a flush of embarrassment Peleus scowls and looks away.

“One bird, that’ll be two stones,” says the butcher, returning with the prepared and parcelled up snow-hawk and a smile that reminds Jasyn of the range of knives on show.

Jasyn’s family tend to stick to peas, pulses, root veg and berries, as well as some much-appreciated dairy from Snowdrop the ageing claw-goat. But if a snow-hawk takes it upon itself to die of natural causes in the eaves of their hut, who are they to waste the creature’s life (and death)?

“Used to be two birds, one stone,” Jasyn protests, digging into her pocket. There are only so many therma-stones – mostly the size of pebbles – to go around, so exchanging them for a service means making sure it’s worth a drop in home-temperature.

“Hard times,” says the butcher with a shrug and not a flicker of sympathy.

Jasyn pays up. She doesn’t have much choice. The warmth in her pocket doesn’t linger long after the stones are gone, but the vague sense of injustice does.

“Bring back the cloth when you’re done,” says the butcher as Jasyn heads for the door. “No point in wasting good gauze.”

Jasyn nods. And, as the door *ting-a-lings* behind her, she wonders – and not for the first time – why Peleus has never tried to make friends.

THE ICEHOUSE

Jasyn checks over her shoulder.

On the top rung of the in-built ladder, leaning against the roof of Hera's domed icehouse, she's not exactly hidden away, but there's no one nearby as far as she can see. Over the last ten sun-orbits, her parents have repeatedly told her not to attract unwanted attention. She needs to blend in. This means keeping a cool head, *and not creating ice out of her own fingertips*. They might not have explicitly said that last part, but in their refusal to acknowledge her ice abilities, they have let their disapproval be known.

Well, to hail with that.

She places her palm to the cracked, triangular ice-pane. It shouldn't take long. The surface hazes under her skin. Sandwiched between the outer layers, the inner ice turns to liquid. The fizz of changing states buzzes in Jasyn's veins.

It takes concentration to alter the structure of ice like this. She's done this many times over the past few sun-orbits. Her first dozen attempts made more problems than they solved; cracking the panes to within an inch of destruction or shattering them beyond repair. The trick is to not overdo it, to get the tension just right. It's not something she can easily describe. Perhaps that is one upside of having to keep hidden – no one will ever ask.

The slice of ice reforms crystal clear, ready to amplify the sun's rays. In performing repeated experiments, Jasyn had discovered this formulation to have the quality of magnifying

heat without melting. She doesn't understand it, but she sure discovered ways to put it to use.

For a village in need of heat and the ability to grow things, it was a gift from above. (And *above* wasn't even open for business anymore.) After Jasyn's design, Atalanta had engineered the skeletal structure of the dome formed of triangles and Jasyn had created the clear ice slices to slot within. It made sense to start with pre-made lumps of ice and then transform its composition, rather than conjuring ice from nothing. It also made sense not to be seen while doing it. Therefore, even though the ice could have been sourced closer to home, Jasyn and Atalanta had lugged every triangle from the furthest corner of a local icefield.

That had been more exhausting than the transformation.

When they'd made the icehouse for Hera, it had caused a stir. Jasyn's parents had packed, ready to move on. When villagers knocked on their door, her parents were about ready with their own pitchforks. But with only one door to their cottage-shack, they had no choice but to open it.

It was unclear whether the villagers believed that such precise and clear ice could be mined from the fields or were too thrilled by the idea of heat and sustenance sources attached to their homes, but either way, all they wanted was to know whether they, too, could have an icehouse.

Now everyone in the village has one.

Before the additions of the icehouses, it was only possible to dig the soil in and around the village of Ice Lump, plant hardy root vegetables and hope. The resulting produce was inconsistent, small, tasted like it had defied nature to exist, and it likely produced fewer calories than those expended to plant and dig it.

Together, Jasyn and Atalanta have managed to increase crop yield and consistency. All it took was Atalanta's engineering abilities, and Jasyn's determination to make a bad situation better (plus one or two skills she is not at liberty to discuss).

She double-checks she's not been caught – *in this world of ice, the power to create more of it is not a welcome gift* – before she climbs down the structure's inbuilt rungs, jumping the last few. Here she is, putting ice to good use. And she can tell no one (but Atalanta) what she's doing.

Speaking of which...

Atalanta loiters by the door to Hera's icehouse.

"Hey. I want to show you something," signs Jasyn, tugging Atalanta by the hand and doing everything in her power not to let on that she never wants to let go.

Atalanta never likes entering people's houses. Mostly because there are *people* in them. Though, usually, Jasyn and Hera don't fall into that category.

"Hera's asleep," Jasyn signs, and Atalanta allows herself to be led through the rickety wooden door that's only on its hinges because Jasyn insisted on fixing it, and into the icehouse.

In spite of its name, an icehouse is far from cold. The warmth of the chamber sends a shiver down Jasyn's spine. No sooner is Atalanta inside than she takes off her blue-green patchwork of a hooded tunic, pulling it over her head.

Jasyn's mouth dries. Atalanta in her vest, contoured arms and body on show, she has no idea where to look or how to stop her cheeks from combusting. Atalanta never did deal well with heat and now Jasyn's cheeks are suffering the same.

"Come on then," signs Atalanta. "Are you giving me the tour, or what?"

Hail, has she been staring? How mortifying. Jasyn overrules her embarrassment with a grin. "Look, they're taking shape," she signs, guiding Atalanta to each planter, excited to show the progress.

The carrot tufts arranged in neat rows. The teal orbs of vine-tomatoes starting to ripen to blue. Pyramids of sour-peas trained along thin, tall sticks. Cucumbers. Turnips. Squish. Barrels of potatoes. There's more greenery here than Jasyn's seen in her whole life. By Iolcian standards, this growing

chamber is an oasis. More than enough to support Hera through the next sun-orbit, at least.

Though, it's not all rainbow carrots and sunshine. Some of the leaves have been showing signs of root rot. Other villagers' produce, too, is suffering the same. That worries Jasyn. None of the usual methods seem to be weeding it out.

Which is all the more reason not to be so isolated from the world. If she can visit other villages, see if they have a similar situation, maybe she can figure out how to solve it. Maybe she can return with helpful information.

Atalanta is watching her, Jasyn can feel it.

"You wanted my thoughts on something?" signs Atalanta. She wrings her hands and Jasyn wonders why she seems nervous. Beads of sweat decorate her collarbone. *She wants to get out of the icehouse, is all.*

Without too much fanfare, Jasyn grins and points to the labyrinth of pipes and funnels working their way from the roof down to every plant bed in the chamber.

"Ta da."

The irrigation system is something they'd designed together, but Jasyn had insisted on installing it. Others in the village can water their own crops, but Jasyn had wanted to make life that little bit easier for Hera.

Atalanta observes with interest, following the pipes as if assessing them. Her expression gives little away. *Is she impressed? Indifferent?*

Jasyn's smile fades as she notices several of the pipes aren't delivering water to the leaves and soil. She scratches her head. "It was working yesterday." She climbs atop one of the growing tables to get a better look at the irrigation structure near the roof, but she has no doubt Atalanta will solve the issue before she can.

Atalanta's eyes are already closed, her head tilting slowly this way and that. Concentration furrows her brow. She points up to a portion of pipe a reach away from where Jasyn stands. Sure enough, on closer inspection, a couple of leaves have

blocked the half-pipe. How Atalanta manages to hear such things is most impressive.

“Show off,” says Jasyn.

Atalanta beams.

Jasyn clears the blockage and the irrigation pipes funnel water throughout the chamber, the water tinkling pleasantly in the background. As she jumps down from the table, a brief stumble topples her against Atalanta. Jasyn’s usual grace evades her when she’s within Atalanta’s orbit.

“Sorry,” she says, catching her weight with her palms, but not without pinning Atalanta between herself and the table.

Atalanta’s mouth hangs half-open in surprise and Jasyn short circuits, sparking internally. *Did the icehouse just get a whole lot warmer?*

“Jasyn, is that you?” calls a voice from the main cottage. Hera has obviously woken from her nap.

No sooner does Jasyn turn to greet Hera, Atalanta has vanished. Jasyn sighs as she closes the side door.

“Yes, Hera. Only me.”

“Oh, look at you, Jasyn. Growing taller every frost-filled day,” Hera enthuses, though Jasyn’s sure she hasn’t grown for at least a couple of sun-orbits now.

Her back as crooked as a mountain peak, Hera hazards through the main doorway with a smile as she adjusts her half-moon spectacles. Her eyes often glaze a little when she greets Jasyn. She tries to hide it, blaming the sting of frost, or the shock of icehouse heat. Though she has never said as much, Jasyn understands she – like many of the villagers – had wanted children but couldn’t get the Permits. How cruel that these things are decided by a stranger from afar.

Being the youngest in the village, Jasyn has become accustomed to the attention. Over the sun-orbits, the villagers have commented on her height, how much she is or isn’t eating, the freckles on her cheeks, and how *clever* she is (as if that’s a ground shattering surprise!). All of which are well-

intentioned, but not welcome when you're now a grown-up and looking to be taken seriously.

"Cracked pane is all sorted." Jasyn points to the roof. "And the irrigation system is up and running."

With a short-sighted squint, Hera adjusts her spectacles and takes in the network of pipes. "Heavens. You are a star, Jasyn. What would I do without you?"

I'm leaving... I'm sorry.

Jasyn presses down the guilt. She'll be back, even if she doesn't know when.

"That's a lot of firewood," says Hera. She gasps. "Oh! Are those frost-berries? My favourite. *Skies above*. There's enough here to feed me for the rest of my lifetime."

She's exaggerating, but Jasyn hopes they'll last her a while. She'll have enough produce to live on from the icehouse after that, so long as the root rot doesn't take hold. And if it does, Jasyn is confident her parents or others in the village will step in to assist.

"I've put them on ice, so they'll last longer," says Jasyn, tucking the buckets away in a cooler part of the cottage.

"Here. Sit. Drink."

Jasyn does as she's told as Hera limps over with heated cups of strained ice, flavoured with a few of the recently picked berries.

Hera, the village doctor, had helped Jasyn's father when they first arrived. Of all the villagers, she has always been the most interesting. That she had lived in places other than Ice Lump has Jasyn welcoming stories of the world out there, and the world *before*. She had lived in the Ice City when things were good, back before the Great Freeze. A time when therma-stones had been decorative and not a form of currency.

"You would have fitted into the world that was," says Hera, carefully lowering herself into the armchair that's almost taller than she is.

Jasyn narrows her eyes. “That’s one way of saying I don’t fit into this one.”

Hera chuckles. “It’s no bad thing. Trust me.” She sighs. “Under Queen Alcimede, the citizens of Iolcus were kind, dedicated, brave. The Ice City – Iolcus City, then – it didn’t have a wall around it. There were no threats–”

Jasyn leans forward and claims Hera’s specs, cleaning them on her sleeve. “I think there’s a rose tint on these things.” She grins as Hera buries a smile and snatches them back. “You make it sound like it was all sunshine and an easy life.”

“Well, it was warmer, that’s for sure.”

Jasyn settles into the blanket-covered seat, ready to be told all the tales under the Seven Suns about what life had been like before the Great Freeze (“nothing ‘great’ about it,” Hera mumbles). Knowing that this visit will be her last, it’s a cruel irony that her appreciation for village life is growing, only as she’s about to leave it.

HOME FIRES

Obscured beneath undulations of ice, the wagon rests at the perimeter of their smallholding. A forgotten relic from another time. The horse box leans crooked at its side, fused to the ground, as if it had decided this was where to set down roots.

Inside the one-room ice and brick cottage, Jasyn showers behind a curtain in the teeth-chattering coolness of the ice-melt shower system. The contraption functions in much the same way as the wagon's engine: ice is added at the top, converting to water rather than steam. Albeit water with the occasional lump of ice, resulting in a confusion of lukewarm and freezing cold.

How Jasyn wishes she'd managed to get back and shower before the heat from the attached icehouse had dropped with the sunset.

With a flick of a switch, the flow and function reverse, sucking the air and moisture from around her. Within moments, she is dry. Once dressed, she shivers her way back into the cottage's main area. She steps over Snowdrop, who spends most evenings nestled against the table-rock, enjoying the conducted heat from the therma-stones in the table's centre. Though they are a couple of stones short, it's enough.

While neither of her parents are looking, Jasyn checks the space under her bed where her carry sack is stored, packed and ready to go. Such preparation under her parents' noses hasn't been easy, and is part of the reason it's taken so long.

Her letter to them – to explain that she needed to get away, to explore, and that she only didn't tell them because they would try to stop her – is tucked into the edge of the bag. She'll leave that on the table-rock when she sneaks out before first light. Having pushed the boundaries to their limits in her lifetime, creeping out of the cottage in silence is something she has perfected.

She places her palms on the warm table-rock. Rhea stirs the pot at the table's centre, atop the cool blue glow of therma-stones, while Chiron hand-sews a pattern into the purple trimming of burgundy material. Their bodies aged but their eyes bright, her parents multitask while watching their modest-sized ice-screen.

An advert for THE GAMES asking the too loud and oft-repeated question of "WHO WILL SURVIVE?" makes way for more sobering content. A goggle-wearing meteorological forecaster, designated LYNK by her on-screen titles, announces "Things are not looking too bright..." as the projected solar system scenario plays out.

Everyone under the ice skies knows the large planet orbiting the sun is Iolcus. The smaller green-tinted celestial body latched onto an orbit around Iolcus is Corinth, one of Iolcus' two moons. According to the info-burst playing out, over a couple of sun-orbits the moon will position its path permanently between the sun and Iolcus, blocking its light.

"An accentuated sub-zero front will move in across Iolcus," forecaster Lynk explains, "resulting in an eighty percent increase in ice-storms as Corinth steals our light."

It's been a long time since Jasyn looked up astronomy on the Shard. She's no expert, but she's not entirely convinced by the 'science' aligning with what she's read. Though there's no way for her to check. And the info-burst *sounds* convincing. And why would anyone make something like that up?

"Steals our light? What a load of ice-sludge." Rhea frowns as she serves out snow-hawk stew. "As if the Corinthians have a choice in the matter. The good king and queen wouldn't have stood for such mindless propaganda."

“It may not be the Corinthians’ fault,” Chiron reflects, as his dull silver thread catches the glow of the therma-stones, “but there’s no escaping the facts. That hunk of rock they’re living on is on course to block our light. It’s the last thing we need.”

“*Stealing indeed.* They didn’t choose their celestial path.” Rhea’s voice has dulled to a whisper. Even though they’re in their own home, there’s always the fear that the walls might be listening. It could be paranoia. They’ve lived in this village without incident for ten sun-orbits. If someone was going to spy on them, wouldn’t they have done it by now?

Rhea switches the ice-screen off.

Jasyn wonders what the rest of the village thinks about Corinth, but she can’t ask for fear of rocking the raft.

“If Corinth is a threat, why aren’t we all doing more about it?” she asks.

“Too busy surviving, darling.” Rhea frowns.

“Right. No more politics at the dinner table.” Chiron shuffles the therma-stones to stoke their heat. The stones sizzle.

“Darling...” Rhea’s voice holds a warning.

Absently toying with her cup, Jasyn’s fingertips have webbed with ice and stuck to the edge. Though her parents usually pretend not to notice such manifestations, they only forget this pretence when telling her off. If questioning certain subjects isn’t welcomed by her parents, using her ice – whether intentional or not – is actively frowned upon. Just as whispering in your own home is ridiculous to Jasyn, so, too, is not being herself.

Which is one of the reasons she needs to go.

Perhaps she’ll be lucky and discover some place she can be herself.

Jasyn fidgets. Atalanta should be here by now. It’s not like her to forget. Had she made her uncomfortable today? Had she gotten too close?

Chiron pauses between mouthfuls to change the subject. “I thought the orphan girl was joining us this evening. She knows she’s welcome...?”

“Perhaps if you stopped calling her ‘the orphan girl’?” says Jasyn. Why has Atalanta decided not to join them? She has a habit of disappearing, yes, but not of not turning up. If she isn’t coming to dinner, Jasyn will bring it to her. *They need to talk.*

With somewhere more interesting to be, somewhere she can be more herself, Jasyn consumes the stewed snow-hawk faster than her digestion appreciates.

“Ah, now. I’m just saying,” Chiron stutters. “It’s not right to live all the way out there, without modern comforts...”

Rhea presses an inbuilt utility. With a grinding churn, it melts and boils the ice in her cup.

“Barely a roof over her head,” Chiron continues. “All alone. Not natural hiding out there amongst—”

“—nature?” Jasyn smiles as she stands to leave.

Rhea chuckles.

“Just you wait a minute,” Chiron scolds, as he grabs the sewn burgundy material and holds it up to Jasyn, checking its length.

“What’s this?” Jasyn isn’t sure about the bold colour. Now that it’s held up to her, it’s obviously a cape, wide enough to wrap around her twice. She can’t miss the dull silver and flecked gold of the brooch acting as a cape-clasp.

She thumbs the metal. Her father must have found it in her display of treasures. He couldn’t know its origin, its discovery in the bear cave. He couldn’t know the clasp signifies curiosity and warning. A warning not to stray from what’s known. A warning that curiosity leads to consequences.

“To keep you warm on your adventures.” Chiron grins.

“What adventures?” Do they know of her plan to escape? Will they try to stop her?

Jasyn forces a breath.

“Every day is an adventure, is it not?” Chiron smiles. He’s mellowed a lot since the mountains.

Before she can stop herself, Jasyn responds, tersely: “Every day here is the same.”

Chiron’s grin fades. He tries to hide his hurt by looking away and Jasyn feels it like a kick to her stomach.

“Some might consider an uneventful life an achievement,” Rhea interjects, as Chiron snaps the thread from the finished piece.

Not willing to leave until she’s turned his sadness to a smile, undone her moment of thoughtlessness, Jasyn claims her new cape. Though the colours may not be of her choosing – a patchwork of burgundy and purple, with dull chrome thread lines – her father’s expertise with a needle is clear in the stitching.

With a flourish, she tries on the cape, inspecting her reflection in the metal of the ice-melt machine. She makes a show of posing, shoulders back, hands on hips, one foot up on a chair, the epitome of a triumphant and dramatic explorer.

“What do you think?” Jasyn’s melodrama encourages her parents to laugh.

The tension thaws.

With a beaming smile, Chiron shoos her towards the door. “Go on. Off you go.”

Warmed by their smiles, clutching the bowl of Atalanta’s dinner, Jasyn heads into the frost-filled evening. She manages only three strides from the therma-blue cottage, before–

“Don’t be back too late,” Rhea calls, and Jasyn can’t help but cringe at her limited freedom. She’s twenty-two sun-orbits old, for hail’s sake. It’s as if her parents think the monsters of the peaks roam down here, too. Don’t they realise that even monsters wouldn’t venture to a place this boring?

POSSIBLE WORLDS

The light of the two moons, with assistance from the Astropyxis and a thousand glittering stars, guide Jasyn across the uneven incline away from the village.

With the sun having set, the Glowing Woods effervesce awake with clicks and gentle warbles. Once within the thicket, her way lit cool-blue and orange by the lanterns of filament fruits, Jasyn treks along her well-trodden path.

Each fruit she passes prickles with light.

They've always fascinated her. She loves how each one responds to human warmth, and how they contain constellations within the delicate armour of their translucent petals. When they were younger, she and Atalanta would cup their hands around a filament lantern and pretend the resulting dance of colour tied into their thoughts or feelings or something inane like whether they were telling the truth in their game of Truth or Not.

As they grew older, Jasyn had stopped encouraging the game, in case it actually betrayed her truth. She wouldn't want to scare Atalanta off.

She never asked why Atalanta chose to live out here, nor why she wanted to live on her own, instead of with them. It could be because of her mother's warning – the village is composed of Iolcians and she is a 'sky person' – or that she likes to keep her own company. The placement of her dwellings on the hilltop suggests she reached a certain distance

from the village but could go no further. As if she didn't want to be here, but couldn't bring herself to leave.

Of course, Jasyn could be projecting.

The filament fruits around her dim, echoing her sadness or acknowledging the chill in the air. Perhaps Atalanta likes living here, within the orbit of the village, but is more at home at a higher elevation. *Other people* aren't her strength, and it would be difficult to be a hermit without a bit of peace.

A splash wakes Jasyn from her daze, snapping her attention beyond the filament galaxy, to the movements in the lagoon where a figure swims, each stroke effervescing a rainbow shimmer across the surface.

The clothes hanging from a black and silver branch are clue enough.

How Atalanta bathes in such nerve-biting waters, Jasyn has no idea. Her own teeth chatter when she washes in the partially heated melt-water of the cottage. Even though she's the one who creates ice out of air. The universe sure does have at least a few things backwards.

If Jasyn were to fall into the water, her muscles would freeze up and her brain would stop working. Much like they do when she's caught in Atalanta's orbit. Much like they are now, as she fails to avert her gaze from Atalanta's obscured naked form beneath the rainbow ice-water, moving with a grace reserved for mythical creatures and dreams.

Jasyn hadn't meant to look. She hadn't meant to stare. Several seconds too late, she averts her eyes, and promptly – because the universe really does have a cruel sense of humour – trips on a root.

Oof!

The filaments surrounding Jasyn offer a blush of magenta, though the heat rising to her cheeks does this well enough. By the time she climbs to her feet - the bowl of stew magically uninterrupted - Atalanta is already dressed, drying her hair and offering an amused half-smile.

The lanterns near Atalanta pulse a warm and calming orange, not unlike a campfire or her Transonics. With the constellation of filaments lighting their path, they make their way to the edge of the woods, overlooking the village and surrounding terrain. This lookout point, according only to them, is the Observatory. So-called because of their many hours spent here, staring out over the village and up at the night sky.

As she stares up, *always up*, the campfire warms Jasyn on one side, Atalanta – always radiating heat – on the other.

Sometimes colours dance in the sky. But not tonight. The expanse of black pin-pricked with light reminds Jasyn of her glow-worm dappled home cave in the mountains. They might be out in the open now, but she feels about as contained as she did then.

She toys idly with the ice in the air. Atalanta has only ever looked intrigued or vaguely amused by Jasyn's ice-abilities. In fact, it would be welcome if she'd reacted a little more to Jasyn's ice. Would being a little impressed be too much to ask?

Jasyn traces the shape of a bird, mid-air, flightless.

Up in the mountains, she had peered down over a world hidden by a sea of mist. Here, at least they can appreciate the cool glow of the village. The flickering orange light from home fires, the flaming blue of therma-stones. Surrounded by unexplored darkness, the village looks not unlike a dying star system.

A quiet life is an achievement, according to her parents. It is also monotonous. A village that spends its time surviving... that can't be all there is to life. The only thrilling aspect of this place is the idea of leaving it. Though to do so without the person occupying the other half of her new cape conjures quite the opposite feeling.

While Jasyn stares up at the stars, Atalanta devours the dinner Jasyn brought and traces the sewn illustrations on the edges of the cape. The first patch depicts a palace, angular and sharp like the fabled Iolcian Ice Crown. The second,

undulating water. The third, mountains. The fourth, a collection of huts.

Jasyn is more interested in the shapes in the sky than any meaning behind the stitching on her cape. Panicked by the conversation she's been putting off, she traces the constellations to steady her breath.

The Sky Palace, shaped with towers and turrets, but only if you've imagination enough to read between the lines of the stars. The Golden Dragon, the coiled constellation with a certain yellow-shimmer about it. The Three-Headed Beast, teeth twinkling three snarls of judgment at her.

For someone who seems to want adventure, she lives by a lot of fears.

It's now or never.

I'm leaving. Please come with me. That's all she has to say. Why is it so difficult?

"How many worlds do you think are out there?" Jasyn signs her words as she speaks. That wasn't what she was meant to say, but perhaps any words are better than none. And perhaps she'll build courage as she goes.

Atalanta rolls to join her in staring up at the stars.

"How many better than this one?" Jasyn asks, absently.

The fire crackles.

"Is it so bad here?" Atalanta signs.

Without thinking, Jasyn blurts out, "There's a whole universe out there. We're on a tiny ice-covered lump of rock. I can't imagine it could be much worse."

Atalanta sits up, squaring her back to Jasyn. Her rigid posture lets her know she's said the wrong thing. But all is not lost. If there's one thing Jasyn knows, it's how to make Atalanta smile. (Even if it is after she's made her frown.)

Jasyn shuffles and turns so she's lying beside her in the opposite direction, her hands on show.

“There is a land, far from this darkness...” Jasyn whispers and signs the story her parents told her a thousand times as a child. The story she shared with Atalanta in the fledgling days of their friendship. The story they’ve relayed to each other time and time again ever since.

When Atalanta half looks at her, Jasyn abandons speech and signs only.

“Legend tells of a magical land. Plentiful and golden...” Her hands motion the way Atalanta taught her. Only on occasions, she fumbles, seeking the warm touch of Atalanta’s guidance. Jasyn signs a purposeful repeat – “Plentiful and golden...” and in doing so, trails wisps of ice in the air.

Atalanta joins in – “The Golden Land...” – and Jasyn’s heart is full.

“It was once like Iolcus: scarred, barren, broken...” In silence, they sign in unison, their smiles building as they go through the motions of the story they’ve recounted so many times.

Jasyn’s fingers shape the wisps into an orb and a handful of snowflake stars. Relaxing with Atalanta, transforming the ice is easy. If only her abilities were always this consistent. Right now, in this moment of calm, she plucks the moisture from the air instinctively and shapes it to her will.

“Until one day, a saviour descended from the heavens,” she signs, building a mid-air creature with four legs, a tail and horns, not unlike an embellished version of Snowdrop the claw-goat.

Atalanta’s smile widens.

“Dazzling. Golden. The offspring of the Seven Suns and skies,” Jasyn signs in an exaggerated fashion, making Atalanta laugh.

“Their Golden Fleece breathed life into the lands.” Around the ice-creature, Jasyn exhales and with artistic wrist-flicks adds to the mid-air canvas a smattering of trees, a land ripe with produce.

“And in this golden land there was no need for hope or fear...” Atalanta signs.

With a flutter of her fingers, Jasyn gives the creature wings. With a single gesture, she undulates the air and it flaps majestically on the breeze.

Together they sign the final words: “...for life was as they wished it to be.” Only this time, as their hands make shapes, their fingers willingly tangle.

Did *she* take Atalanta’s hand? Atalanta reached for her, too, didn’t she? Can Atalanta hear the thunderous beating of her heart? Does she understand? Is she pleased? Thrilled? Relieved? Uncomfortable? Confused? Indifferent?

The delicate ice sculpture separates, sinking under the push of gravity, hanging distorted in the air.

Jasyn retreats.

Before she can fall further into her well of panic, Atalanta is on her feet with an exasperated huff. Her forward momentum fragments the flying claw-goat. It dissipates in a puff to nothing but ice and air.

As she flees, she gestures, but she’s so intent on escaping, Jasyn doesn’t grasp her meaning. Though it’s not difficult to discern that she’s upset and wants to be elsewhere.

“Atalanta?” Tripping on her new cape, Jasyn scrambles to her feet. She launches forward with, thankfully, more grace. If she moves fast, perhaps she’ll catch up. For once.

With a swipe at the air, snow douses the campfire. *Talk about the ability to smother flames.* Both figurative and literal. It’s exactly the sort of ability she shouldn’t be flippantly using, much like shaping the air to tell her tales, but right now she’s less bothered by her parents’ rules and more on catching up to Atalanta.

Jasyn’s line-of-sight returns to the tree line, as Atalanta disappears into it.

FILAMENTS

The wake of colour-changing filaments pulse from blue to purple to red, highlighting Atalanta's path.

"Atalanta, wait." Jasyn tries to keep her voice down, not wanting to overload Atalanta's Transonics.

Though Atalanta doesn't let Jasyn catch up to her, she doesn't speed away. She could disappear if she wanted with the grace of the breeze, but instead she storms through the copse, twigs snapping underfoot, stopping and starting.

"What's wrong?" Jasyn isn't sure she wants to know the answer, but the desperation to make things right prickles beneath her skin. "Please..."

A branch laden with snow sheds its burden right in Atalanta's path, enough to make her step backwards. Jasyn isn't certain whether to take credit for that or not.

Closing the gap between them, she had expected to see anger, not tears, in Atalanta's eyes.

"Heavens above, Jasyn. You think I'm an idiot?" Atalanta turns to Jasyn only long enough to sign.

"What?" *Of course not...*

"You've stocked up Hera with a thousand frost-berries and a lifetime supply of firewood. Your carry-sack is packed, hidden under your bed. You've been acting strange for weeks. Months. Sometimes, you won't even look me in the eye."

"Please don't be angry..."

“I’m not angry, I’m...” She flounders for the words, or is perhaps not brave enough to say them.

“You’re *what?*” says Jasyn, with more than a hint of desperation. When Atalanta is within reach, Jasyn takes her chance to squeeze her hand, but she snatches it away.

“I’m sorry here isn’t good enough for you. I’m sorry you’re leaving me and you haven’t even the courage to tell me,” Atalanta signs.

Wait. What?

But it’s too late. Atalanta is on the move.

“No. Atalanta. That’s not...”

Drawn back by Atalanta’s progression, the branches appear to wait for Jasyn to approach before springing back into place, swiping and slapping her as she attempts to catch up.

“Why are you running from me?” Jasyn gasps through panicked breaths. Seeing Atalanta so unhappy stings more than a branch to the face.

Arriving in a clearing, Atalanta swings to her with the ferocity of a creature that’s had its tail bitten.

“*Me* running from *you?*” Atalanta gestures, her shoulders heaving.

The filaments pulse confusion – purple, amber, gold, red blush, the occasional sky blue and vibrant green – surrounding them as though they are suns and the bulbs a rainbow of a thousand clustered planets. It would be an awesome sight if Jasyn weren’t so preoccupied by the more pressing emotional landscape before her.

“That is literally what is happening,” Jasyn points out, bending forward to heave breaths, her mind rattling in bewilderment.

“You’re leaving me behind, again.” Atalanta throws her words at Jasyn. “You left me in the mountains, and now you’re leaving me here.”

Her thoughts all in a swirl, the filaments within Jasyn ignite. Atalanta isn't trying to escape her. She's afraid that's what Jasyn is doing to her. Jasyn knows first-hand the logic of pushing away the person you're afraid might do the same to you. If only Atalanta knew how much she means to her – but before Jasyn can try to tell her, Atalanta moves to flee.

The building blizzard stops her in her tracks.

The filament lights are almost lost to the snow curtain enveloping them.

Despite a spontaneous snowstorm, Atalanta looks no more or less upset than moments before. Her feet keep moving, as if she might dart through the blizzard blockade. Jasyn shakes her head, trying to shift free of the blizzard. It's her doing. It percolates beneath her skin. And if Atalanta wants to storm off, who is she to block her path?

But the howl of the building chaos whoops and whistles, clouding Jasyn's thoughts.

"I don't want to leave you, Atalanta." Jasyn raises her voice above the gusting swirl of their storm. "I've wanted to ask you for so long. I'm afraid you'll say no. That you won't go with me." The words are so small. How can she express that Atalanta means everything to her? How can she make her understand?

"Not go with you? I left the mountains for you..." signs Atalanta, her tear-filled eyes meeting Jasyn's.

The bulbs blaze, cutting through the snow curtain like a hundred wagon headlamps.

How is it possible to be so close to someone and yet feel so far apart?

"But you retreated from me..." Jasyn tries to wrap her mind around what Atalanta's words mean. Their proximity in the wagon's blanket box, Atalanta turning from her, replays in her mind. The ache in Jasyn's chest has dulled over time, but it's still there, like a broken arrowhead embedded in flesh that her body has tried and failed to expel.

The blizzard howls.

“I needed time...” signs Atalanta and her meaning clicks into place.

It wasn't 'no' forever...

Jasyn has climbed cliff faces and leapt across ravines, but nothing compares to this moment. This moment in which, against the backdrop of swirling blizzard and blazing lights, Atalanta grasps Jasyn's cape, closing the space between them. When their mouths meet, the ice inside Jasyn melts and everything is warm and right.

The blizzard calms and Jasyn smiles. *How have we not done this before?*

In their own personal snow-globe, their fingers entwine and Jasyn's heart quicksteps. The air around them pulses. The gentle snowfall shuffles to the beat.

Atalanta cups Jasyn's face, holding her there, forehead to forehead, while she draws breath. She squeezes her eyes shut, as if she, too, can't believe this is finally happening. Pushing a strand of stray hair behind Jasyn's ear, Atalanta's smile lets her know everything is as it should be.

If only they could stay like this, time paused in their perfect snow-globe, forever. As if eavesdropping on Jasyn's thoughts, the snowfall pauses mid-air, a constellation caught, crystallised.

When Atalanta opens her eyes, glowing bright by the light of filaments, Jasyn finds them filled with the yearning her own eyes have been hiding for so long. A smile teases Atalanta's lips and the fire within Jasyn flourishes.

Jasyn knows that wry smile. It says: “Catch me, if you can.”

Atalanta launches into the woods.

And Jasyn doesn't need telling twice.

A NEW FRONTIER

Following the blazing filaments, Jasyn picks up her pace.

When Atalanta's trail of light loops back on itself, over and over, Jasyn's head spins. She stops to get her bearings, but the drizzles of light emanate from all directions.

Like an apparition, she appears square in Jasyn's adrenaline-pulsing vision. With a cheeky half-smile and a gentle kiss, she backs Jasyn against the nearest tree.

Jasyn's heart dances.

The snowfall stutters.

How Jasyn wishes they'd played this game before.

Her eyes electric, Atalanta explores beneath Jasyn's woollen over-shirt, dextrously undoing the buttons of the shirt underneath. Fingers fumbling, Jasyn follows her lead, simultaneously wanting to be faster and slower as she lifts the hem of Atalanta's tunic, shuffling it to untuck her vest. Her touch trails across the heat of Atalanta's lower back.

A shiver tremors through Jasyn, but the cold has no chance to take grip as Atalanta tugs the edges of her cape, enveloping her in warmth. When you live in the frozen climes of Iolcus, it isn't particularly wise to shed layers in the nighttime wilderness.

With only the warning of a mischievous smile, Atalanta launches into the woods, chill air taking her place.

The entire universe couldn't stop Jasyn from smiling.

As fluid as a stream around boulders, Atalanta weaves between the trees. Jasyn ups her pace, but the glow of filaments grows distant as Atalanta does the same.

Jasyn knows these woods. They've been roaming them for half their lives. She knows where Atalanta is heading, but only by keeping her within sight can she convince herself this isn't all some elaborate dream.

The urge to be close overtakes Jasyn and in that exact moment, a laden branch shudders free its snow right onto Atalanta, stopping her in her tracks. Knowing the cause and culprit to be Jasyn, Atalanta turns, half a heartbeat before Jasyn arrives before her with her own grin.

Despite being covered in snow, there's no cooling Atalanta. She draws Jasyn closer, her breaths warming Jasyn's cheeks. Jasyn wants to kiss her, but she also wants to capture this moment.

Everything has changed, and yet it's as it has always been.

Here they are, playing chase. Here they are, playing a whole new game. A game to which Jasyn doesn't know the rules, but knows with every part of her that she welcomes learning, excelling, becoming an expert.

Within a few lightning quick movements, Atalanta is wearing Jasyn's cape, fluttering as she weaves between the trees. The light of the filaments suggests she's trailing a rainbow swarm of fireflies, led by her Transonics' orange glow.

A laugh escapes Jasyn.

She takes a moment to catch her breath, before wading through the thicket to the clearing housing Atalanta's den. Created of three filament trees woven together, the natural dome formation always strikes Jasyn as impressive evidence of Atalanta's abilities with the materials of nature.

It could be this that's taking her breath away, or any number of other causes. The running. The world changing for the better. The prospect of what – or who – awaits her.

The thrill of the situation wards off the biting chill.

From the orange glow peeking from the patchwork of sack-cloth, woven between trunk and branch gaps, it's clear the firepit is already blazing.

"How do you do that?" Jasyn mutters with an impressed smile.

A curtain created of old sack-cloth masks the entrance. Stepping through into the den, a gentle heat embraces her. The filaments within the den's canopy pulse purple, pink and white, competing with the firepit flames and glow of Atalanta's Transonics. An entire visual symphony of colours dancing.

The fire's smoke funnels up between a purposeful break in the branches, joining the flurry beyond, but that's not where Jasyn is focused.

Boots already off, socks, too, Atalanta lies on Jasyn's cape as if it were a bed sheet. Leant up on her elbows, her long-sleeved tunic already removed, down to her vest. *How did she manage that without removing the cape?*

Jasyn shakes her head. The mechanics aren't important. Atalanta's chest rises and falls, catching up on breathing, or perhaps, like Jasyn, utterly unable to breathe slowly right now. The smile that greets Jasyn is playful and awash with something else. Something more. Something Jasyn has hoped and wished for, but thought may never be.

As Jasyn removes her boots at the tent edge (it would be rude not to), she maintains eye contact, in part for fear that should she look away, their spell will be broken, but mostly because the longing in Atalanta's eyes is ground-shattering, breath-taking.

For the first time, neither of them look away.

She peels her jacket off and pulls the woollen over-shirt over her head, hooking them on the selection of handcrafted metal and wooden bows lined up at the tent edge. Jasyn's off-white long-sleeve already hangs open (*thank you, Atalanta*) and Jasyn is reminded to be impressed.

Offering to assist, or unable to contain herself, Atalanta kneels to meet Jasyn, taking the liberty of undoing the knot at her trousers. This presents the challenge of thermal leggings, which Jasyn had never thought could be anything other than functional. But the way Atalanta's hands drift up her legs, exploring their shape, the way the black holes of Atalanta's pupils expand into her nebulous irises, Jasyn could be convinced otherwise.

Having so many layers to get through is both a frustration and a thrill. There may be more barriers, but anticipation builds when there's more to unwrap.

Jasyn's breath catches in her throat as Atalanta tugs the thermals down. That Atalanta's mouth presses to her bare thigh is... *hot*... in every possible way. Atalanta's lips kindle heat and Jasyn's senses ignite, while the warmth of the firepit licks over them both.

Unclasping the cape and letting it fall, Jasyn kneels to join her.

Atalanta must notice the tint of her cheeks because her fingertips caress Jasyn's heated face and a smile teases her lips. Her touch sparks joy. *How is it even possible to be filled with so much feeling?*

The fire crackles as occasional flakes of snow drift through the woven chimney. The snowfall pauses, impossibly, at intervals, in line with Jasyn's hitched breathing as she runs her fingers over Atalanta's bare arms, admiring the contours and the softness of her skin.

As their fingertips tangle, their hands clasp and their bodies melt against each other. Atalanta nuzzles against the faint scar on Jasyn's chin, right at the point where a vole-rat bit her, so many sun-orbits ago. With Jasyn's eyes closed at the thrill of new sensations, Atalanta takes her opportunity to strip away Jasyn's long-sleeve, leaving her in only shorts and vest.

Jasyn fumbles at the hem of Atalanta's vest and the clasp of her trousers, not sure which direction to explore first. Before she makes much progress, Atalanta peels Jasyn's vest over her head and flips her.

She's good at that.

Nestled in her soft cape, Jasyn gains her new bearings. Atalanta pins her, with that same smile she always has when they wrestle and she wins. So long they've been separated by circumstance and misguided assumptions. Now, only fabric lies between them.

Down to nothing but her shorts, Jasyn observes that Atalanta – despite having fewer material layers to begin with – is far too clothed.

Well, that won't do.

Hands exploring the uncharted terrain of Atalanta's skin, Jasyn encourages her vest upwards as she rises to meet her. She takes a moment to commit Atalanta's body to memory. When she traces just inside Atalanta's waistband, Atalanta's eyes narrow as she offers the kind of gasp that makes Jasyn's heart pound.

The air itself stutters and moans.

Atalanta caresses Jasyn's sternum. Can she hear her heart thrum?

When Jasyn cups her cheek, Atalanta kisses her palm at the point of the triangle scar that she's had for as long as she can remember. As children, Atalanta likened the markings to a mountain in the clouds. Their time in the mountains had added a faded, jagged scar, interrupting the uniform pattern. Jasyn might not know where the original scar came from, and she regrets all the circumstances around the additional blemish, but the sensation of Atalanta's lips upon her palm has her head in the clouds.

Unravelling the knot at her own waistband with one hand, Atalanta guides Jasyn's hand under her shorts. As Jasyn finds the most heated part of her, Atalanta's guttural sigh is so unusual to Jasyn's ears, her senses swim. Discovering the intoxication of touch, of bringing Atalanta bliss, Jasyn's inner flame ignites all the more, as though her true self had been dormant and only now unfurls.

When Atalanta starts moving rhythmically against her, guiding Jasyn to bring her pleasure, Jasyn's breaths race and stumble as though she were the one being touched. When Atalanta coils with tension, clutching Jasyn's shoulders, pressing her ever closer, heavy breaths discovering a summit, Jasyn could collapse to atoms. When Atalanta's tension releases in gasping, euphoric jolts, Jasyn wants it to happen again and again.

Her hand pressed to the centre of Jasyn's chest, Atalanta flops to the cape. Jasyn's about to ask if she's okay when a satisfied smile takes slow formation.

Jasyn's hand gravitates to the one warming her chest. She can hardly believe she gets to see all of her, to touch all of her. Well, she hadn't yet managed to remove Atalanta's trousers or shorts, but that can be remedied.

Jasyn hooks her thumbs in Atalanta's waistband, seeking approval. A heated intensity in her eyes, Atalanta nods, and Jasyn's insides turn molten again, but she tries to stay focused.

Removing Atalanta's trousers, she smiles. As she suspected: no thermals.

Just as she's toying with the waistband of Atalanta's under-shorts, Atalanta gently wrestles Jasyn to the cape-covered floor. Her playful smile, her hips and hands pinning her in place, let Jasyn know in no uncertain terms: *it's my turn now*.

Jasyn doesn't stifle her grin.

Finding her way beneath Jasyn's one remaining layer (under-shorts cast almost into firepit flames – *apt*), with a series of exploratory kisses Atalanta traces the freckled constellations on Jasyn's skin.

The den's filaments pulse – celestial orbs in star-like formation – but the only galaxy that matters is the one in Atalanta's eyes as she maps the Snow Tiger constellation down Jasyn's jaw and neck.

Excitement skitters between them. Electricity dancing beneath Jasyn's skin, the cold outside is an entire galaxy away.

Over Jasyn's chest, above her heart, Atalanta traces the Astro-pyxis, the Sky Compass. As she follows the line of Jasyn's stomach, she explains her journey: "The determined gaze of The Explorer, pointing towards discovery," she signs, trailing downwards, her tongue traveling to new terrains.

The heat of molten ice courses through Jasyn's veins. *Skies above*. She gasps as Atalanta's touch turns the air inside out and sends her mind and body sailing amongst the stars.

DAWN CHORUS

With her cape cocooning their entwined bodies, Jasyn wakes from a deep and restful sleep. The night air is clear and crisp. Filaments within the den canopy offer a gentle pulse of orange light.

For the first time in a long time, the mechanisms of Jasyn's world have clicked into place and she can finally breathe. Thoughts of their intimacy spark beneath her skin. They've been in each other's lives so long, how had they not deciphered the alignment of their feelings? How had they not figured out this, *this new state of being*, as a possibility?

Atalanta's skin against Jasyn's is more warming than a treasure chest of therma-stones. Her Transonics dimmed, dialled so low her audible reach can't be far. A lock of hair lies across her face and Jasyn musters all her might to leave it be, to not wake her, to not lose this perfect moment. If only they could stay like this forever.

Her thoughts drift to how their lives will fit together. Though, she might be getting ahead of herself. She doesn't know for sure whether Atalanta will join her in leaving Ice Lump. She doesn't know whether this development will keep hold of Jasyn, tethering her here. Like the trees that create her den, Atalanta herself has put down roots here. Whether those roots are specifically tied to Jasyn, or are independent, are facts and feelings Jasyn will have to discover. All she knows right now, is that there are possibilities, and a life with Atalanta – wherever that may be – sounds like the perfect adventure.

Judging by the occasional trills from the woods, first light isn't far off. Nor is the intrusion of reality. Her parents. Jasyn dreads to think about the level of panic they'll have reached by this hour.

But leaving Atalanta's side is an impossible task.

With a gentle sigh of resignation, as quietly as she is able, Jasyn teases her limbs from beneath and atop Atalanta, and reclaims her shorts and vest from beside the firepit. Part-clothed, and contemplating how to reach her other fallen garments, her attempt to dress is thwarted by Atalanta placing her chin on her shoulder, as if to question, "Where are you going?"

Atalanta's eyes are already bright and alert as her hands find Jasyn's waist. Finally, Jasyn gets her chance to tuck that strand of hair behind her ear. It's mystifying how such a simple action can cause her heart to almost burst.

Plucking a filament from a branch at the den's edge, Atalanta holds the fruit, pulsing a slow orange light, beneath Jasyn's chin.

"Truth or Not?" she signs with her free hand, teasing Jasyn with a smile. "You'll tell me what you're feeling from now on, no matter how you think I'll respond?"

"Truth," says Jasyn and means it, understanding that Atalanta is making the same promise.

Sure enough, the bulb glows brighter.

Their noses touch and Jasyn closes her eyes, wishing she could just exist in this moment and not return to the village. When Atalanta strokes her cheek, aligning their mouths, Jasyn's breath hitches. She doesn't care if it means not leaving the village today. She wants to kiss Atalanta more. *Much more*. Their mouths meet and the ground trembles.

Jasyn's heart catapults against her ribs at distant rumblings.

Is she the cause? Has her inability to control herself caused some kind of chaos? It isn't the most ridiculous fear given her history.

A mighty explosion from afar shudders the den and their figurative snow-globe shatters. Whatever this is, it's not of Jasyn's doing. The outburst is from the east, from the village.

Jasyn and Atalanta take to their feet and pull on their clothes and boots, leaving shirts unbuttoned and socks abandoned.

Panic writhes, knotting her insides.

The filament trail, dying in the early morning light, dulls from blue to burgundy-black as they fly past. When they reach the edge of the woods overlooking the village, explosions of light pierce the sky. Grumbles of machinery and distant ice-pellet shots punctuate the screams of villagers, drowning out the dawn chorus.

Jasyn's world collapses like a supernova.

The village is under attack.

SHATTERED

Sharp air splinters in her airways.

Lungs aflame, Jasyn forces herself into a sprint.

At the outskirts of the village, the soldiers have moved on, but their destruction remains. The familiar rickety door of Hera's icehouse sticks out like one remaining wobbly tooth in the rubble that lies where her dwelling should stand. Jasyn's insides revolt as she pulls at the wreckage in search of her friend.

Atalanta tugs Jasyn's arm, forcing her behind a broken wall. Before Jasyn can demand what Atalanta is thinking, a military spotlight sweeps past, missing them by a hand's width. Laser sight lines of ice-pellet rifles intersect in the air.

The military are on patrol.

The searching spotlight casts across a limp arm protruding from the debris.

"Hera," Jasyn gasps and is about to launch for her when Atalanta holds her back. With a sad shake of her head, she lets Jasyn know that no sound animates the body in the rubble. That Atalanta can hear such things is a wonder, but not one to smile about right now.

The loss crushes the air from Jasyn's lungs. She follows her instincts and wades deeper into the shadows. Her parents. Are they okay?

A voice from the dark: husky, strained and scathing. "You should never have come here." Its tone is unfamiliar, but the

timbre is not. By the time Jasyn's focus adjusts, with a final exhalation, the shape in the shadows stills, strange and unsettling in its contortion.

The butcher.

Amidst the chaos of crumbled buildings, her eyes are vacant, staring deep into Jasyn. Her mouth hangs open in an unhappy blend of horror and rage, blood pooled around her, black in the lack of light.

Screams fracture the air.

With no time to consider the meaning behind those final words, Jasyn and Atalanta press deeper into the shadows.

A grinding grumble invites Jasyn to peer between fallen cottage walls.

Armoured military trucks, emblazoned with angular ice-crown motifs and the letters AE (*whatever that means*), plough a path of destruction through the village. Helmet-masked soldiers load sacks of produce into one truck, materials from toppled buildings into others. The trucks spotlight villagers and run them down.

The crushed and skewered bodies are loaded into the back of another truck, along with livestock and animal carcasses. A nauseating mix of injured-living and recently dead.

Unlike the other vehicles, this one has SOS stamped on its side, but Jasyn doesn't know what that means.

"Why are you doing this?" the voice of Ani cries out from within the death-truck, as a demolition vehicle ploughs through his drinking den. The gut-wrenching puncture of an ice-bullet puts an end to further questions.

A sick buzzing pumps through Jasyn's veins. Her limbs are leaden. Her thunderous heart might implode. Everything is happening at a distance, through water. Or it's some sort of nightmare. She hopes she'll wake soon.

In her daze, she spies movement near the butcher's shop. There crouches Peleus, the butcher's son, clutching his blood-covered axe-knives, an odd mix of terror in his eyes and

suppressed laughter haunting his lips. Chaos can do strange things to people.

The ground shudders with the earth-shattering thud of an explosion.

With a painful grimace, Atalanta grasps her ears and buckles.

Jasyn gravitates to her. From Atalanta's gestures, she's fine, it's that the noise is too much. With a sliding gesture across the veins of her Transonics, Atalanta extinguishes the glow. The silence in this deadly scenario must be as uncomfortable as sensory overload, but at least that helps them blend with the shadows.

With a nod, Atalanta lets Jasyn know they should keep moving.

Jasyn puts her legs into action. She should want to run in the opposite direction, that's what her parents would tell her to do, *run and hide*, but she can't. She needs to make sure her parents are safe. Though it doesn't take a sky ship scientist to know she'll only be able to do that if she stays alive.

Pressed to the shadows, she and Atalanta use each wall – fallen or otherwise – as a shield. As Jasyn's home comes into distant view, a soldier drags Snowdrop the claw-goat out by her horns. Snowdrop is followed by Chiron, the unwilling captive of two masked military. Neither submit willingly, kicking and clawing their captors.

Without thinking, Jasyn breaks cover and races past the familiar faces of her neighbours as they lumber for their own lives. Running towards the chaos rather than away has heads turning, but Jasyn keeps her focus narrowed on the three soldiers, her father and Snowdrop.

Chiron puts up a mighty battle, lashing out at the soldier in front. That, combined with Snowdrop's latest kick, unbalances the soldier, who loses their grip on the feisty claw-goat.

With her moment of freedom, Snowdrop takes the liberty of headbutting her captor in the shins. The soldier cries out. It would be farcical, if it all weren't so repulsive.

Pain shoots up Jasyn's leg. She stumbles on rubble, her ankle protesting. Within the four unsettled heartbeats it takes to regain her stride, an ice-bullet echoes, displacing the air. Snowdrop folds to the ground, blemished with red, a pistol smoking ice at her temple.

"No," growls Jasyn, anger thick in her gut.

Her father cries out to Snowdrop.

"Shut him up," the lead soldier instructs her underlings, one of whom raises his pistol.

Lungs burning, blood pumping, a whooshing in Jasyn's ears puts the world at a distance. Her leaden legs make her think she's treading water. The fear that she won't get there in time crystallises within her.

Her frustration unleashes in an almighty roar.

The soldiers' attention swerves to her.

A vibration erupts from Jasyn's chest, buzzes along her arms, to her fingertips. With a sudden shove, the air shudders.

A wall of sharp crystals takes formation and skewers into the gun-raising soldier.

Knocked off his feet, the soldier spasms; his death almost immediate.

Ashen-faced, the lead soldier reaches for her own pistol, but is caught short by the sudden arrow in her chest. She hasn't a moment to look for the archer in the shadows before she impacts the ground with a crunch.

The third soldier takes aim at Jasyn, fast closing in—

Chiron kicks up from the ground, knocking them off-kilter.

The bullet clips Jasyn's ear.

It burns, but she races on.

The soldier boots Chiron in the stomach, buckling him, before raising her pistol to Jasyn again.

As thunder tears across the sky, that same eruption tremors through Jasyn as she raises her forearms to protect herself.

A shield of mid-air ice forms.

The next bullet lodges within the ice-shield, wedged in Jasyn's line of sight, as if threatening to continue its journey should her hold on the ice disintegrate.

The next two bullets shatter the ice-shield.

Jasyn thrusts her hands downward. With all the power of a pistol, ice and lodged bullets fling at the soldier, riddling her with puncture wounds.

The soldier drops to her knees as Chiron clambers to his feet.

Any relief on his face is undercut by the roaring arrival of an SOS truck, clipping his shoulder and knocking him back to the dirt. He cries out his protest as two helmet-masked soldiers claim him and cast him into the cage of corpses.

Beyond Jasyn's visibility, two gunshots follow.

Chiron's protests stop.

Jasyn's lungs revolt.

The buzz builds in her, but any mighty unleashing of her energies is beaten to the punch by an armoured vehicle as it jettisons *something* through the window of her home.

The blast from within kicks down the walls and shoves Jasyn off her feet, sending her skidding across the sharp ground.

Her world violently turned inside out, the ice-bricks and mortar of her home having suffered the same, the ringing in Jasyn's ear crescendos and her vision bleeds to shadow.

UNPREDICTABLE SKIES

A breeze...? An atmospheric shift...? A song...? A whisper...?

It calls to Jasyn.

Or perhaps that's just the ringing in her ears.

Blood runs hot at her temple. Her lungs protest at the fierce dust-filled air. Uncertain which way is up, down, left or right, she scrambles to her knees amongst the ruins of her home, *carcassed* across the snow.

"Atalanta?" she calls between coughs, scanning her hazy surroundings, searching for her, for soldier silhouettes, and for a clue of where they have taken her father.

The early morning light loses its battle against the dense wall of ash and vaporised debris. The question of where her mother is punches her in the gut. Have they taken her, too? Is she somewhere beneath the fallen foundations?

Scanning the remains of their home, Jasyn attempts to stand, but their displaced table-rock anchors her foot. So focused on searching for the people who mean the world to her, she barely registers the web of ice reaching from under the table-rock, jagged crystals seeping out.

A breeze...? An atmospheric shift...? A song...? A whisper...?

Whatever it is would be more noteworthy if Jasyn wasn't preoccupied with the gun-wielding shadow haunting the parting dust. Flanked by two faceless soldiers, hiding behind

protective gear, the trio sweep through the village wreckage in search of... what? Bodies? Survivors to be dealt with?

The unsettled terrain crumbles around Jasyn as she attempts to free her foot, drawing unwanted attention. The swipe of the bullet across her upper arm burns sharp before the sound of the rifle punctures the air.

A wisp of rubble mist masks her position.

The next bullet whistles past her ear.

Her other leg levers the substantial weight of the table-stone, freeing her foot. She launches forward, only to be anchored.

The pain at her ankle is sudden.

Horror twists her gut. The clawing ice has taken the vague formation of a weather-gnarled hand, frozen about her ankle.

Another bony-fingered ice-formation crackles into existence as if reaching out from quicksand. It points towards a bundle of material protruding from under the dislodged table-rock. Purple and burgundy offcuts. Precisely the colours of her cape.

When the formation refuses to let loose its grip – with soldiers hunting her in the mist – in the hope it's trying to tell her something, Jasyn obeys and tugs at the fabric.

A lump of metal about the length of her forearm clunks free. It is unmistakably a sword, albeit with a blade that has suffered at the hands of poor craftsmanship. It's too blunt to cut through anything. Its hilt is decorated with a snow-globe of glass. Its detailing is accomplished, in contrast to the blade. It's unlike anything Jasyn has seen before.

The sharp end of a rifle pierces the wisps of rubble dust.

In need of a weapon, even a substandard one, Jasyn grasps the hilt of the blunt sword. What happens next, she has barely a moment to fathom.

The ice-hand about her ankle releases its grip, fading to nothing as if Jasyn had only imagined it.

That song. That whisper. It sings.

Ice sharpens her senses.

A buzzing percolation sprints up her arm, looping through her chest and back the way it came, as if forging a physical connection, a circuit. The causal order of things is the last thing in Jasyn's mind as electricity spirals around her chest, electrons about a nucleus. It flows around her, and through her, skittering along the sword's length.

Dull metal transforms to blazing ice, sharp and serrated.

As overpowering as the sight of her pulsing electric self might be, it does nothing to change the advance of the shadow-soldier and their tensing trigger finger.

Jasyn swipes into the dust-mist.

A pained gasp and a thud let her know the power of the sword.

Rising to her feet, Jasyn stares at the churning snow-globe at the hilt, its abyss, its unpredictable swirls of dark and light. With each undulation, the world around her drips away. She's no longer in the middle of an unexpected battlefield, fighting for the home she was on the cusp of abandoning. Her family have not been stolen from her, because there is no one and nothing, only the dance and song of the weapon in her hand.

A bullet punctures her shoulder. Every nerve ending bristles raw.

Lightning splinters, plasma in the sky.

The grumbling of military trucks tears into her consciousness. Her mind is so torn it might rupture. That her parents have been taken, that Atalanta could be hurt, that these people are here to harm them, burns in her gut with the force of a thousand uncut therma-stones.

She raises her eyes from the abyss.

The building blizzard is of her creation, sharp and unforgiving. And she doesn't care.

Two masked soldiers stalk towards her, carrying themselves with the confidence of those who have never been challenged.

Jasyn's body retreats before she has fully registered what she's doing. The dragged tip of the sword cuts into the ground, splintering a web of ice. Her terror and outrage bursts from her in a war cry.

The stalking soldiers follow her swift movement with rifles, but their bullets merely decorate the ground in her wake.

With a double swipe of Jasyn's ice-formed sword, the ill-prepared military find their insides escaping them.

If that weren't enough to end them, ice-plagued lightning slices across the sky, punching down into the village like a tantrum-throwing god, frazzling the afterlife from them.

If a god-like view over the village were possible at this precise moment, it would capture the convoy making its retreat. It would capture the weather-based mayhem orbiting Jasyn as she advances towards the fleeing military.

Through the blizzard, Jasyn deciphers the shadow shape of a truck, marked SOS – its canvas covering flapping in the storm. It could be the howl of the wind, or her mind playing tricks, but her father calls out to her. She's too preoccupied to notice the soldiers staring at her in horror.

Algid and Squall, the only horses in the village trusted to roam free, and thus the only ones not to have been loaded into lorries, thunder past the armoured trucks.

With military attention frazzled by the sudden onslaught of life-threatening, skin-slicing, skies, the horses tear past. Their hides, toughened by the weather and genetic predetermination, remain unscathed.

In a spray of skidding snow, Algid and Squall arrive at Jasyn's side. And, with no thought to her own survival, she leaps atop Algid, directing him after the machines of destruction.

Jasyn's heart thumps a war drum rhythm in her ears, one hand gripping mane, her other tightening about the unfamiliar

ice-sword.

The sky blazes, roaring with a thousand thunderclaps. Lightning forks down to meet the rage-rippling electricity branching through Jasyn's sword. It should hurt, but instead, her whole body tingles. Her every nerve ignites. Every synapse sparking, untethered, charged by her rage and connection to the skies.

Thwack-thwack-thwack –

Algid rears.

Three arrows in his path.

What the hail?

Lightning scorches through the blade. Jasyn remains in place, kicking Algid on.

Knocked off-kilter, the whoosh of arrows registers as she sails through the air and lands in a spine-cracking fashion on the ice-crust ground.

She's been chased and taunted enough by Atalanta's tactical near-miss arrows to know her to be the cause. Her cape must now sport a couple of arrow rips.

The trucks are getting away.

Jasyn claws to her feet, attempting to stand – *whoosh-thwack-thwack-thwack*. Her cape anchored, she strains against the arrows.

Plucking each, snapping those that refuse to give, she stumbles after the fleeing trucks, only to be tackled to the uneven ground.

"Let me go!" Jasyn cries out as she struggles against Atalanta.

"There are dozens of them, hiding behind armour," Atalanta signs, pinning Jasyn's upper half in place with her legs, Jasyn's cape and lower half anchored by arrows through fabric. "They are armed. And you... You are chaos..." Atalanta's brow arches, pleading.

The churning skies loom above them as Jasyn struggles, but Atalanta holds her ground, knocking the sparking sword from Jasyn's hand.

Landing with a clunk, the ice-sword retreats into itself. Blunt and inert.

And yet the skies fail to calm.

Wind whiplashes into a funnel around them, flying ice-shards cut into them, and still Atalanta presses her to the ground.

"Your death won't solve anything," she signs.

Two can play at this game, thinks Jasyn, unbalancing Atalanta, toppling her. Jasyn launches forward, but Atalanta lashes out a leg, tripping her.

The shock of her chin slamming into the hard ground jolts through her neck. *That's not how we've played this game before.*

An explosion serrates the sky.

Armoured trucks jettison ice-spears.

Before Jasyn can consider standing again, Atalanta is on her, cocooning her in a tight embrace as the spikes pierce the ground around them.

Atalanta jolts and cries out as a spike talons through her.

Nerves lash like lightning as the same ice-spear pierces between Jasyn's shoulder and chest. The sight of the ice-spear slick with the blood of Atalanta's shoulder, connecting down into her own, strangles her nerves.

A sharp pang of guilt and fear. *Atalanta would keep her safe, even if it means her own death.*

Atalanta's tears fall to Jasyn's cheek, melting Jasyn's rage. Having played the part of human shield, Atalanta slumps against her. The heaviness of their exhaustion weighs them both down.

Her despair numbed by Atalanta's warmth, her own consciousness ebbing away, the funnelling blizzard opens out

to offer a framed view of perfect star-studded skies. The promise of endless possibilities, or oblivion.

PART III

THIS HEAT-FORSAKEN PLACE

THE TRAIL OF DESTRUCTION

An electric lash thrums from the epicentre of her shoulder and chest as though some malevolent force wounds her over and over. Her bullet-ripped ear pulses and stings. Her eardrums thump an unwelcome rhythm. The overwhelming ache in her chest draws Jasyn's hand to beneath her shoulder. She expects to discover torn flesh, crusted blood and other unwelcome by-products of her spike-punctured torso. Her fingertips find only the softness of fabric.

The light sears Jasyn's eyes as she heaves them open. Her torso is bound with bandages.

Her eyes focus. The blanket protecting her from the cold is her purple and burgundy cape. As the wind whistles through the ruins of her family home, Jasyn's crowded mind figures out she must have been moved here, to be sheltered from the whipping gale.

Where is Atalanta?

She needs her to be in one piece.

Beneath the haunting howls lies a sinister silence, an absence of sound that could shatter everything, if it weren't already broken.

There's no time to dwell. With the sun still creeping over the horizon, it can't have been too long since the murderous convoy left.

Her father is gone. Shot. Silenced. Murdered?

That she'd likely witnessed her father's life forcibly ended, that Snowdrop is dead, these are things her sickened stomach and her reeling mind refuse to process. The thought, *the fact*, keeps trying to enter her mind, and her mind says *No*.

Where is Mother?

Hope is in short supply right now, but there is the minutest possibility that her mother has been taken alive. And that is reason enough to get up and do something.

As Jasyn tries to stand, invisible strings tie her down. Her body revolts against each muscle movement. Her limbs are heavy, her ankle aches, her legs shake and her arms are as pliable as rope. Several gasps escape her.

Just as she's about to fall, Atalanta swoops to her side.

"You're okay?" asks Jasyn with equal relief and disbelief as Atalanta helps her make the eight-step journey out of the ruins of her home.

Between the shacks and cottages reduced to rubble, fog weaves through the village, tying it in knots. Jasyn seeks Atalanta's reaction, only to find her wriggling free. This could be interpreted as 'please don't touch me, it hurts', but there's a flash of something in Atalanta's eyes. Is it resentment? Jasyn's own tunnel vision and chaos had put her in harm's way. Again.

Whatever it is, it kicks Jasyn in her own wounded chest.

The tunic at Atalanta's shoulder is ripped and blemished crimson. The ice-spear went clear through. Jasyn can't help but ask:

"How did you get it out?"

"One good thing about ice-spears..." signs Atalanta, favouring her opposite side and trying to stifle her gasps. "They melt."

Jasyn wishes she could make the pain go away. Atalanta saved her from storming to her death. If Jasyn had pushed on, she would have ended up riddled with bullets. Atalanta had seen sense when Jasyn saw nothing but rage.

The loss. The anger. Her fear. Love. It all conspires to pull Jasyn in a thousand directions. It's no wonder she stumbles between the debris.

She catches herself falling against the metal of the wagon. She must have frightened the military away before they could claim it.

If Jasyn could run from herself right now, she would.

Perhaps that is what Jasyn sees in Atlanta's eyes.

Fear.

They'd promised to communicate more, to be honest with each other. Even if she's afraid of the answer, shouldn't she ask what Atlanta is feeling? The opportunity is cut short when Jasyn's gaze falls to the sword protruding from the blemished snow.

Its snow-globe hilt simmers white, in contrast to the darkened blood slicked along the dull, inert metal.

Backing away from the mysterious weapon, Jasyn's focus snags on the fallen soldiers. Some are skewered by Atlanta's arrows, others sliced by Jasyn's sword or returned bullets and ice-fragments.

One guard's helmet has knocked loose. Her eyes are vacant, her mouth open and rigid, trapped in some eternal nightmare. Did she want to do this? Did she enjoy tearing a village and its people apart? Taking everything they had? What purpose does that serve?

Looking upon their fallen bodies, Jasyn waits for guilt to arrive, but only a sickness rises in its place. In the choice between the lives of those she cares about, and those who threaten them, she'd choose the same avenue again and again.

As the fog around them twists tighter, choked laughter carries on the breeze.

Jasyn stumbles towards the sounds. She can sense Atlanta in her orbit, hanging back, allowing her the space to process all of this.

The military are gone, but their trail of destruction remains. It's as though a swarm of oversized vole-rats devoured the village. They've cleared them out – of food, building materials and bodies, living and dead.

Jasyn navigates toppled buildings and a trail of fallen soldiers. Unlike those she and Atalanta encountered, ended by ice-bullet, shrapnel, sword and arrows, these soldiers are ruptured by angular wounds, their torsos hacked apart.

The sight adds to Jasyn's queasiness as the ongoing laughter treads the line between humour and despair.

It's not her mother. Besides knowing the timbre of her mother's laugh, with Atalanta's ability to pinpoint sounds, she would have sought any survivors. She would already have mentioned to Jasyn if Rhea were amongst them.

At the end of the path strewn with bodies, nestled between a skinned crow carcass and a pile of ice-screen shards, freckle-faced Peleus huddles against a half-fallen wall. Axe-knives clutched in hand, his clothes stained reddish-brown, he stares at nothing, as if the middle distance might hold the answer to what happened here.

With Atalanta's nod of approval, not wanting to scare him, and not wanting an axe to her torso, Jasyn approaches with care.

Without looking at them, Peleus smirks as he lets them in on the punch line: "Being a butcher's boy came in handy." He laughs, but his smile fades. "They've taken everything," he gasps, with more than a hint of disbelief.

Jasyn supports her shaking limbs against a section of wall that shouldn't be where it is. Nothing is as it should be. The hideous snapshot of Peleus' dying mother hacks into her mind. Where she had lain is now empty, albeit blood-stained. They must have taken her, too.

Jasyn bows her head at Peleus' loss.

"This is it?" She looks to Atalanta. "We're the only ones left?"

Atalanta's grimace is answer enough.

“Why attack the village? Why take everything?” Jasyn’s questions are not rhetorical, but no one has an answer.

She retraces the life-shattering events in her mind. The cages packed with villagers. The storm of trucks emblazoned with AE, SOS and sharp crown insignias.

“They’re the Ice King’s military,” she says. “Whatever they want the materials for, there’s no industry out here. Chances are they’re headed to the Ice City. That’s where we need to go.”

Jasyn senses rather than sees Atalanta’s grimace.

“What’s the point? Everyone’s dead.” Peleus scowls.

The sheet-ice beneath Jasyn’s feet cracks into a sharp web, the ice fluctuating in her like the dying sparks of a fallen filament fruit. *Everyone is dead.*

“Did you see every one of them die?” she asks, her voice like flint.

Peleus takes a step back, acknowledging the cracked ice with widened eyes. “I saw what happened... What you did... You tore up the skies.”

Jasyn’s mouth opens to retaliate, but no words come out. She had churned the sky, its energy flowing through her. And, somehow, she is still here. Yet these things seem like footnotes to her stolen family, their decimated village.

“I think you scared them off.” Peleus half smiles.

The wind whistles. She’s sure as hail not ready to talk about what happened.

“You should rest,” Atalanta signs, frowning. “What happened, it’s exhausted you—”

“The village has been crushed,” signs Jasyn, ignoring the lash of pain from her shoulder. “It’s hardly time for catching up on sleep.”

Peleus observes with bemused interest, unable to understand the inaudible conversation. Jasyn cringes at gesturing to Atalanta in such a tone. Atalanta nods at her silent

apology. In Atalanta's eyes, there's no resentment or fear – or whatever Jasyn had thought she'd seen – just understanding.

“If there's the smallest chance that anyone is alive,” says Jasyn to both of them, “we have to do something. The longer we stay here, the less chance...”

If they'd been left with a single body, they'd be preparing sky burials right now. But there's nothing. Not even for the scavenging snow-hawks. There are rituals. Ceremonies to say goodbye. But their purpose is to comfort the living, and time right now is better spent trying to save those who may not yet be lost.

“Good job I already packed,” Atalanta signs with a gentle smile.

The aching area in Jasyn's chest that's occupied with battling the concept of death is given warm respite as she understands Atalanta would follow her to the ends of this planet and beyond.

Sunshine attempts to peek through the twisted fog, and Jasyn hopes Atalanta sees the gratitude and affection in her eyes.

“So?” interrupts Peleus. “Are we going to the Ice City or what?” Judging by the glint of enthusiasm in his eyes, he has not only come around to the idea, but this is, for him at least, a welcome adventure.

THIS HEAT-FORSAKEN PLACE

I *t's a dangerous world out there.* That's what her parents would say. They would tell her to run the other way, to put another thousand measures between herself and the Ice City.

Perhaps it isn't right to put words in the mouth of those who aren't here to dispute them. Whether her parents would tell her to run and hide or to attempt a rescue, Jasyn has no real idea. Even if they were here to speak their minds, wouldn't it be up to Jasyn whether or not to listen?

She can sense Atalanta in her orbit.

"I don't want to put you in danger," Jasyn begins, only speaking half her mind. *I don't want to put you in danger again*, is the whole truth. It seems to be a recurring theme in their world.

Atalanta waves away the idea. "Danger? That's what I'm intending to keep you out of." The quiet sparkle in her eyes and her fledgling half-smile let Jasyn know she won't be moved on this. That harm may come to Atalanta as a result is terrifying. But that they are in this together is a comfort.

"If you two are quite finished..." Peleus re-holsters his axe-knives in the harness at his chest as he wipes the sweat from his brow. "Perhaps we could get on with leaving this heat-forsaken place?"

It has taken some expert hacking to untether the wagon's wheels from the frozen ground, to shave away the sheets of ice and open the doors. Jasyn had tried to reform the ice herself, to melt it as she would an ice-pane, but whether it was Peleus

staring at her like she's some *sky circus* act, or her own exhaustion short-circuiting her, she hadn't made much progress.

The sky grumbles.

Jasyn lingers over the mysterious, blunt sword, half-formed questions crowding her mind as she wraps it in the offcuts of burgundy and purple, placing it in the hidden compartment in the wagon's backseat.

Peleus' interest lingers on the box, or perhaps its contents. His questioning look hangs between them, but before he can ask anything, Atalanta interrupts, loading her own minimal possessions: a hiking backpack with a dozen compartments and a bucket of frost-berries. Her bow and arrows remain across her like a sash.

At the sight of Atalanta trying to hide her discomfort, Jasyn's own shoulder burns, like there's an invisible entity toying with a hot poker.

Lugging far too much in carry sacks, along with a clutch of frozen crows, Peleus climbs aboard. While he gets comfortable in the blankets of the backseat, he instinctively adjusts the purse at his belt and the axe-knives harnessed across his chest.

Jasyn and Atalanta ready the horses.

Feeding the reins through the dash, adjusting collars and harnesses and giving Algid and Squall the required nose rubs, they are ready to go. Though Atalanta has an affinity for fixing anything that's broken, her abilities do not extend to magicking a replacement engine component out of thin air. And so, with the engine perpetually refusing to steam, they'll be travelling the old-fashioned way.

With her cape billowing, Jasyn climbs into the cabin and takes the reins. Reaching from the passenger seat, Atalanta's hand meshes with hers. In normal times, the gesture would convert Jasyn's frown to a smile, but the corners of her mouth can only twitch, weighed down by all that has happened.

If only the circumstances of their adventure were different.

With the warmth of Atalanta's palm against her own, she wonders how many adventures they'll go on together. Is this the beginning of the end? Or will their road stretch far beyond the known horizon?

Jasyn flicks the reins and the wagon creaks back into motion for the first time in ten sun-orbits.

And so it is, on the day she had planned to sneak away from Ice Lump, from her parents and life as she knew it, Jasyn grimaces at the cruel irony that she is finally leaving. Guilt resonates. Perhaps this is all some cosmic punishment for trying to escape. *Ridiculous, of course.*

(Probably...)

With her sense of adventure dampened, with their possessions whittled down to necessities (or what Peleus *believes* to be necessities), darkened by the clouds occupying the sky and Jasyn's mind, their long journey to the Ice City begins.

THE FROZEN GROUND

The further they follow the river upstream against the biting cold, the more ice-infected the terrain becomes. Whether this is Jasyn's state of mind hammering the landscape, or the old saying "The Ice King is not happy today" being more in action the closer they get to the Ice City, it's difficult to know. Jasyn can only hope that the murderous convoy is experiencing the same difficulties. At least then they stand a chance of catching up.

For the longest time, they travel in silence. With the monotony of the scenery, Jasyn's mind wanders.

Snowdrop blemished with red.

Father dragged away. Those two gunshots.

Hera, buried.

Mother missing.

Each thought hacks at her like an axe. She shakes them away, though she knows they will revisit her, uninvited, for the rest of her life. However long that may be.

That she and Atalanta might never again be in the Glowing Woods floods her with a new grief. For thinking about their fun and games at a time like this mixes her grief with guilt.

It's not long since she was on top of the world. Only a short while before that, she had longed for something interesting to happen. If only everything could be mundane again. She'd give anything to be stuck in Ice Lump, so long as her family and village are safe.

If she'd stayed home last night, could she have stopped the soldiers herself? Or would that have been the end of her, too?

Geysers blast steamed ice, rupturing the new horizon. The sight of something she has never seen before would ordinarily have thrilled her. Though her curiosity is piqued, her drive to investigate is overshadowed by gloom.

"What are we going to do if we actually manage to catch up?" Lounging on the blanket box, Peleus directs his question at no one in particular. It could be rhetorical, of course, designed to highlight that they have neither a plan, nor a hope of success.

We cross that bridge when we get to it, is all Jasyn can think, but when the bridge in question is soldiers intent on death and destruction, that is a plan for fools.

"We'll figure it out," signs Atalanta to Jasyn.

Without even giving Jasyn a chance to share Atalanta's words, Peleus demands, "What did she say?"

The journey must be getting to him; the daunting reality of the unknown that lies ahead pulling him in one direction, and the loss of what's been forcibly taken tearing him in the other. Before Jasyn can answer, he flits to another topic.

"You could always throw lightning hail at them?" His tone is indecipherable. Is it excitement? Awe? Annoyance? Fear? A mixture?

Jasyn has been trying not to think about the electric blizzard. The chaos in the skies and within herself. The sword taking shape in her grip: the frozen bloom of the metal.

In the distance, baying ice-dust devils swirl and sway as her conflicting feelings whip up an inner storm.

Is the sword the reason she has a hold over ice? Or perhaps it's the ice that has a grip on her?

When she'd held the weapon, something in her clicked into place. She'd felt like a circuit made complete and simultaneously untethered, a severed electric cable lashing out.

Two opposing positions in the one moment. No wonder she's confused.

"Bloody hail! It is," says Peleus.

Jasyn and Atalanta look over their shoulders, wincing in unison at the lash of shoulder pain, to find Peleus unearthing the sword from the blanket box. Before either of them can stop him, he swipes the air like a child with a newfound toy.

"Put that down." Jasyn pulls the reins, halting the wagon.

In Peleus' hand, the sword remains nothing more than a lump of flattened metal decorated at the hilt with a hunk of glass.

"Is it broken?" He frowns with disappointment.

Jasyn snatches the sword. As soon as the hilt is within her grip, the blade blooms dangerously close to Peleus' face. A spark flickers within the snow-globe glass, mirrored by a tremor of light across the sky.

"*Bloody hail.*" Peleus scrambles backwards, his startled expression evolving into slightly unhinged, child-like awe. "I've never seen Iolcian Ice up close before."

As if the sword were poison, Jasyn casts it aside, making sure not to touch the hilt as she returns it to its wrappings.

"You've seen something like this before?" she asks, looking to Atalanta for reassurance.

"What kind of rock have you been living under?" Peleus snarks. "Have you never watched The Games?"

For the longest conversation she's ever had with Peleus, Jasyn's fairly sure she's not enjoying it. He needs a word about his tone. But that's for another time.

"My parents don't..." begins Jasyn. *They don't like barbaric coliseum theatrics*, is what she intends to say, but the notion of present tense needing to be turned to past, and that she will never spend an evening in the cottage with them again, knocks the air from her.

Peleus doesn't notice, or doesn't care. Either way, he carries on.

"If you watched The Games like any normal person, you'd know the Ice Princess, otherwise known as the Gladiator Princess, carries a sword like this."

Peleus produces an oblong Trading-Shard. No bigger than his palm, it's similar to a Shard, only its info-banks are filled with information solely for entertainment. Designed for sharing and *trading*, it's probably connected to the Ether. This one is branded with THE GAMES. Such an item is expensive. No one else in Ice Lump would have had one. Being the offspring of the village butcher must come with perks.

Scrolling through the digital collection, Peleus arrives at the moving image he wants to share. It displays a helmeted gladiator, kitted out in enough body armour to block deadly blows but still manoeuvre. Her stance is confident, well-trained, and notably punctuated by the brandishing of a sword strikingly similar to Jasyn's own, down to the detail of the snow-globe at the hilt.

"You have to admit the metal only flourishing at your touch is a bit of a clue," says Peleus. "It's Iolcian Ice. The ore that only reacts to those in the royal bloodline." And then, having to spell it out: "It's a Royal ice-sword."

"A metal that only responds to certain bloodlines is ridiculous," says Jasyn.

"Not believing what's right in front of you is ridiculous."

Jasyn grimaces. She's heard about Iolcian Ice. She doesn't live *that far* under a rock. But it's difficult to discern fact from myth. From stories she's heard, the Ice Royals – who would have only been *royals* back then – had been exploring deep caves when the ore's song called out to them, choosing them. (*Ridiculous.*) Jasyn has never been one to assume the validity of such tales, but it is perhaps unwise to disregard the possibilities when the item in question is in her possession, when she's heard its song... and it, in fact, only responds to her touch.

Why her parents had hidden it beneath their table-rock is a far more prescient question.

“Royal?” is all she manages to choke. She’s sure there must be a rational explanation for all this. The sword must have some sort of mechanical or molecular causality behind it. Though that still doesn’t explain why her parents had it...

“You must have heard of the fallen queen and king?” says Peleus, in a tone that Jasyn will soon have little patience for. “Or is that another knowledge gap from you living under a rock?”

We lived up a mountain, actually. Jasyn bites her tongue and sighs, mostly at herself. If she hadn’t lost the Shard ten sun-orbits ago, she’d be much better informed.

“Rumour was,” Peleus continues, “the fallen monarchs, imprisoned in the caves beneath the Ice City, had a child.”

“You might notice I’m not in the ice-caves.” Jasyn can do without having to wrap her mind around such tall tales.

Atalanta thumbs the nape of Jasyn’s neck. It calms Jasyn a little, until Atalanta’s concentrated frown suggests she’s looking at something.

“The designs stitched into your cape,” she signs in a manner that Peleus, too, can understand.

Atalanta unclasps the cape from Jasyn to show her. The first patch depicts a palace, angular and sharp. The second illustrates the flow of undulating water. *A river, perhaps?* The third, mountain peaks. The fourth, a collection of huts or small houses, not unlike their village. What Jasyn had thought to be random images may well be clues to her past.

“Are you saying my parents are...” She trips on the tense. *Are? Were?* She could vomit right now. “...the fallen monarchs?”

Is that why they lived in the mountains? Is that why her parents shunned society for as long as they could? But how did they escape their ice-cave prison? At least the lies, countless unanswered questions, and Jasyn’s fledgling abilities are starting to make sense.

It doesn't matter *who they are*, she wants to shout. *I just want them back.*

Peleus shrugs. "As far as rumour goes, the fallen monarchs are still locked in the caverns beneath the Ice Palace. I don't know what to tell you. There's no escaping the fact that only select people can entice Iolcian Ice into action. And it would appear you are one of them. Whether it makes sense or not, your lineage is royal."

Before this idea has settled, Peleus nestles into the blankets with a strange smile. "I doubt the Ice King will be particularly pleased to discover you're still alive."

Jasyn wouldn't be Jasyn if she didn't have a thousand questions on the matter, but as the mist around the wagon starts to clear, if only a little, they are presented with the more pressing topic of their surroundings.

RUINS

Keeping an eye on whatever may lurk in the drifting mists, Jasyn leads the way in emerging from the wagon and places a calming palm against Algid and Squall.

There are few populated areas in the thousand measures between Ice Lump and the Ice City. If Ice Lump were a moon, the size of this place they've stumbled across en route would class it as a planet. Which makes the stillness all the more eerie.

"I can't hear anyone," signs Atalanta, turning her head so her Transonics can take in their surroundings.

The multiple tyre tracks are fresh. Rubble dust hangs in the air. Where walls should be, only the lower strata of bricks and stone and twists of metal remain; mere outlines showing what should be there but isn't.

The ruins are still, crushed by an almighty boot.

Peleus kicks the dirt.

Pools and spatters of browning blood indicate where human or animal life has been recently and forcefully ended. Other than the brutal blemishes in the snow and ice, there is nothing and no one.

"You think the military shut this place down?" signs Atalanta to Jasyn.

The wind cries out, before dying to a breeze; whispers of the dead, haunting the village streets. From the herd of locomotives standing dormant atop thick-set tracks, this place

must be – must have been – an Iolcian Ice Mine. Each locomotive suffers with frozen piston-joints and layers of clear and frosted ice-plaque. They appear to have been out of action for some time, but how long is anyone's guess.

The main street is several times the length and breadth of Ice Lump, and more linear in construction. A location's purpose could not be clearer. Where the village had been cobbled together over time and expanded haphazardly with new arrivals, in this town all streets point toward or are parallel to the mine entrance. The tracks disappear into the cave's mouth, so dark it could be oblivion.

"You think they mine fresh water here?" asks Peleus.

It could be a water mine, unlocking the liquid from clean ice, or... "It could be a fuel mine," suggests Jasyn. Though wagon engines and the like only need standard ice for power, larger vehicles require the kind laced with ribbons of fuel. This mine would've flourished back when sky ships were in the air.

For a moment, Jasyn lets herself imagine what this town might have looked like, with locomotives chugging into the mysterious caves, returning with carriages full of fuel-sparkling ice. The pistons would turn, powered by the same fuel, steaming the sky with its output. The vehicles would move through these streets at a fast clip, and so would the people. There would be an energy to this town.

But right now, the only energy is ghostly.

"Perhaps they tapped out the source?" signs Atalanta.

Jasyn nods. It's possible.

"Why didn't they take the locomotives?" she says. "They've taken everything else."

Each locomotive stands taller than any of the military trucks. Their composition solid, they are created to be the work horses of the machine world.

"Maybe they're too heavy," says Peleus.

"Or they're still needed," says Jasyn, more to herself.

Atalanta about-turns. “There are voices,” she signs, pointing towards the widest of the streets.

“Voices?” says Jasyn, more for Peleus’ benefit than her own. “Saying what?”

Atalanta closes her eyes, angling her Transonics before shaking her head. “It’s difficult to decipher. But the only heartbeats are ours.” She nods to the horses. “Theirs, too.”

For Peleus’ benefit, Jasyn repeats.

“I can’t tell if that’s creepy,” says Peleus, “or that *you know that* is creepy.” He scratches his head as if genuinely trying for an answer.

Jasyn starts in the sound’s supposed direction. *The voices might have answers.*

Miles of deserted street greets them as they round the corner onto the main concourse. Atalanta nods them towards one part-standing building in particular. A building that would surely have dwarfed those around it, if they weren’t already reduced to ruin.

The rigid banner over its doors reads:

PLAYING TODAY

THE POISON PLANET

“Either of you been to a glacier-house before?” asks Peleus, cutting into the lead.

Jasyn and Atalanta shake their heads. Ice-screen info blasts had sometimes mentioned the event screenings of glacier-houses, but no such moving-image venue existed in their tiny village.

“Me neither,” says Peleus, grinning and taking such a confident lead, Jasyn and Atalanta can do little but follow.

Like the rest of the mining town, the so-called glacier-house has been part claimed and part ripped at the seams. Stepping through the debris, following the unclear voice booming through the semi-collapsed corridors, they arrive at a dark room. Simple seats angle towards a floor to ceiling

glacier formation. On the dented surface, a confusion of moving images loom, lighting up the room.

“It can’t have been abandoned long.” Peleus pauses, thinking this through. “Unless it’s been on repeat forever.”

The cracked glacier-screen images aren’t crisp. The image of a man hides behind static. His discernible features include his fine gowns, jagged ice-crown, and a head-height staff with a glass snow-globe at the top. The component parts are strikingly similar to Jasyn’s own sword.

“Is that the Ice King?” asks Jasyn, somewhat rhetorically.

“Ask yourselves not what Corinthians can add to Iolcus,” says the faceless man. “Ask what it is they will take. Imagine: Corinthians flocking to claim the food from your tables. The food out of your very mouths. That is what will happen if I listen to my critics, to the unpatriotic, and reopen the skies. Closing the skies keeps you safe. I keep you safe.”

“Is this meant to be entertainment?” asks Jasyn of a jaw-droppingly entertained Peleus.

The images and voice track stumble, before regaining clarity.

“And now, I give you the story of the Poison Planet, as depicted by our brave gladiators.”

Planet? Isn’t Corinth a moon?

The faceless king gestures to the obscure darkness behind him. From it, the moving shapes of gladiators emerge, kitted out in black and green, accompanied by music unmistakably inspired by doom. Their opposition, the saviours in blue and grey – *Iolcian colours* – raise their weapons. What follows is part-combat, part-theatrics, as the evil greens appear to be beaten into submission by righteous blues.

In the dark, Atalanta gravitates closer, brushing Jasyn’s hand with her own. The contact sets Jasyn’s skin humming. She squeezes her eyes shut. Now isn’t the time or place to be losing the ability to function. Perhaps understanding this, or misreading Jasyn’s response, Atalanta retreats, placing a ravine of two feet between them.

Jasyn shivers and opens her mouth to explain her own retreat, but no words emerge. Hail. She wishes she were better with words.

“So cool that they have a glacier-house to watch this,” says Peleus, before succumbing to Jasyn and Atalanta’s stares. “What? I can’t help what happened here. Nor can I help that our village had nothing fun in it.”

“We should go,” says Jasyn. “Or we’ll never catch up.”

On exit, Peleus collects a fallen stash of therma-stones. From the stones’ positioning at the entranceway, Jasyn assumes they must have been the payment for admission. It would be logical to assume, from the gathered loot, that this building might have been the warmest in the town.

“What?” says Peleus to her frown. “It’s not like they need them anymore.”

Jasyn is hardly one to judge, since she often collects found items on her limited travels. Items with arguably less use. But still, something about taking what belonged to others (the therma-stones still emitting lingering heat), doesn’t sit right with her.

With no other signs of life, the trio return to the wagon.



Journeying across a frozen land with a proclivity for tumultuous weather means their onward path is seldom clear. And if there is yet another problem with having one’s emotions tied to meteorological conditions, it is that they can sometimes cloud the way with blizzards and mists. And, when the storm that rages without stems from a source within, outrunning such becomes impossible.

Which might explain why they find themselves veered from the river path they had been following.

With the mists briefly parted, from their raised elevation it’s clear what lies ahead of them must have once been a vast body of frozen water. Now, it’s an irregular ice formation, with

channels forged through, buttressed by towering jagged ice-walls, inconsistent in depth and height. The lake must have frozen, defrosted, cracked and reformed a thousand times over, and this odd, irregular, maze-like structure is what emerged. If Jasyn were inclined to flights of imagination, the furrows might lead her to think the ground yoked by a giant intent on offering them the challenge of a mighty ice labyrinth.

“There are tracks,” Atalanta signs as she hops out, gritting her teeth to bury the pain of her disturbed shoulder.

She inspects what lies before them. They’ve only ever tracked and chased each other before. Tracking a convoy of murderous military is new territory for them both, but it would appear Atalanta has quite the talent for it.

Jasyn sets sight on the regular dents that signal the assault of spiked tank treads. The furrows veer off to the southwest, avoiding the maze.

“They must have gone around it,” says Jasyn. “It’ll be quicker to go through.” And before Peleus can voice the objection already taking form on his face, she explains:

“Their vehicles are heavier than ours. They’ll have avoided it in case the ice cracked. Or in case they got lost. But, look, the ice is deep and there are tracks from other wagons. Locals must have used it...” Jasyn cringes at her words. It looks like there aren’t ‘locals’ anymore. “If we follow their track marks—”

“Unless they’re from people who got lost,” says Peleus, in a tone that could be petulant, but Jasyn reads as fearful.

“—we’ll get to the other side quicker,” continues Jasyn. “We’ll have more chance of catching up to them.”

“To who? The military or the dead?” Peleus must regret his own utterance, for he sighs and follows with: “If we die, I’m holding you responsible.”

ICE LABYRINTH

Vein-like threads weave through the ice where the frozen lake has broken, adjusted and reformed over decades. Corridors of bright, glacial blue tower almost three times the height of the wagon, offering the welcome side-effect of sheltering much of the ground from the worst of the weather but also lulling them into a false sense of safety.

In the back of the cabin, nestled in blankets, Peleus sleeps.

In the front, Atalanta keeps Jasyn company. Ready to ‘apply the brakes’ should she have to, Jasyn keeps hold of the reins. The tracks of locals remain, and she trusts Algid and Squall in making steady work of following the furrows, only occasionally nicking the side of the wagon at narrow turnings.

Gusts dip between the walls, creaking and groaning.

If Jasyn was prone to irrationality, she might entertain the idea that the strange sounds and odd echoes are voices whispering on the wind or chattering from within the thick walls. Or creaks in the halls of her own mind. It doesn’t take much to imagine how a place like this, without a clear route, could push someone to scale the walls of their own sanity.

“There were suspicions, you know,” Peleus begins, yawning awake. “You appearing out of nowhere. *Travelling horse tamers*. It doesn’t take a sky ship scientist to connect the dots. You’re about the right age...”

“For what?” Jasyn isn’t in the mood for mysteries, but it’s clear Peleus is keen to be mysterious.

“You ever wondered why there weren’t a whole bunch of kids running around the village?” asks Peleus.

“Permits weren’t granted,” says Jasyn. She had suspected there was more to the story, but her parents had told her to stop asking questions. *No surprise there.* It was one of the many off-limits puzzles she was expected to accept. At the time, Jasyn supposed they might have been trying to stop her from asking unkind questions.

“Twenty-two sun-orbits ago, there was a sickness.” Peleus pauses, giving his words gravity. “At least, that’s what they told us when they came to the village.”

“Who?” asks Jasyn.

“The Ice King’s officials. Soldiers. I was only four sun-orbits old, but I remember.” He thumbs his axe-knives and Jasyn wonders what memories are replaying in his thoughts.

“It’s said the Ice Queen couldn’t control her ice—”

“What’s this got to do with—?” Jasyn interrupts.

In the rear-view, Peleus shoots her a warning glare. She shuts up.

“So, for the sake of Iolcus, her brother – the Ice King – imprisoned her and her husband in the caverns beneath the Ice Palace.” Peleus nestles back into the blankets, getting comfortable for the telling of his tale. “There was a rumour that, in captivity, the fallen monarchs had a child. Somehow, don’t ask me how, the newborn made it downstream—”

The patches on Jasyn’s cape and the stitched depiction of flowing water thread into her thoughts, along with a building tapestry of dread.

“—rumours spread that the child was diseased. The ill-starred child. Offspring of the untethered Ice Queen, the child carried a pathogen – an infection of ice – that would spread like wild-frost. If left unchecked, Iolcus would become entombed in its own ice. So, when the officials turned up to Ice Lump, claiming it was their job to eradicate it, every child not old enough to walk was taken.”

“Taken?” Nausea flourishes like wild-frost in Jasyn’s gut.

“People were convinced they were doing the right thing. That they were helping save their children and guarding against the freeze by sending them to a testing facility. Those who weren’t convinced... well, I guess it’s difficult to reason with soldiers whose lives are forfeit if they don’t complete their mission.”

“Bloody hail.” Jasyn’s exhalation hits the air in a plume. “No one returned?”

Peleus rightly assumes the question to be rhetorical.

“No one talks about it,” he says, his words sombre. He corrects himself: “No one *talked* about it. It was as though they thought not talking about it would mean it never happened.”

“Bloody hail,” Jasyn repeats. She could do with a wider vocabulary of swear words right now.

I’m *the disease*?

You should never have come here. The final whisper of the butcher, *Peleus’ mother*, cuts into Jasyn’s thoughts. So present, so loud, she could be a fourth occupant in the wagon, glowering at Jasyn from the backseat. The glinting of the butcher’s axe steals her breath.

Denying her ice, had her parents been trying to protect her from the fact that her mere existence had resulted in her generation being wiped out? Maybe they’d been right to try to quell her questioning. She might never want to ask another question again.

Her internal fault lines shift. She tugs the reins, bringing them to a halt, and covers her mouth in case she vomits.

Outside, the wind whistles with a haunting howl.

Atalanta reaches out to touch Jasyn’s arm. “The Ice King did this,” she signs. “You were only a child.”

Jasyn’s nausea remains. She hazards a deep breath and a look to the backseat. The only butcher there is Peleus.

Atalanta squeezes her forearm and Jasyn nods. *I'm fine. Fine...*

What must it have been like for the villagers to see her and Atalanta roaming freely? Had their children survived, they would have been the same age. Did they protect Jasyn and Atalanta as if they were their own? Or resent them for being the possible cause of their own loss?

Jasyn concentrates on the angular road ahead. The last thing they need is an emotional crisis to delay their journey. She tugs the reins to nudge the horses on.

"Is that what people think?" she asks. "That the lost royal..." (*that I?*) "...caused..." *...this world to be entombed in ice... their children to be stolen.*

The gusts dipping between the ice-walls pick up momentum. The ice-walls creak and groan, straining and adjusting as if threatening to buckle. Jasyn watches Peleus in the rear-view mirror.

"And what do you think?" she asks.

Peleus lets the question hang there, observing her, framed in the rear-view.

"I think there's a reason we get more sunshine than the Ice City."

That almost sounds like a compliment.

"It's clever, if you think about it. Playing on people's fears. He gets rid of a potential threat to his throne, gets to blame his sister and her child for all Iolcian ills, and – in a world given over to ice – exercises a dose of population control in the process."

The taste in Jasyn's mouth sours.

Peleus nods to himself. "It's not kind, or well-balanced. But clever."

"You weren't taken," says Jasyn. He must have been too old to be a source of concern... Or perhaps having a butcher as a mother helped?

Peleus stares out at the passing ice-walls. “Just lucky, I guess.”

HAIL!

The encroaching weather darkens the corridors to blue-black. With the press of a button on the dash, Jasyn ignites the headlamps. They cut through the dark but – as if the skies want to complicate matters further, or perhaps because Jasyn is unsettled, or even just because it is the weather this world offers – the heavens burst open.

Stinging ice pellets thrash down; some as small as pebbles, others as large as filament fruit. Algid and Squall whinny and shuffle backwards. Ice-wall debris crashes from above, rattling the vehicle and Jasyn's nerves.

“What's that?” asks Jasyn of the shadow shape in the ice-arch up ahead, lingering at the edge of the headlamp beam.

“What's what?” signs Atalanta and says Peleus, in uncharacteristic synchronicity.

Jasyn wipes the window, clearing away the thin film of condensation.

There's nothing in the archway.

“Is there someone... out there?” She signs, to be understood over the building gale.

With a clear horizon, Atalanta's Transonics can pick up sounds many measures away. Jasyn's sure she would have mentioned if she noticed another presence. Though perhaps the maze-like formation has even Atalanta's capabilities doubling back on themselves.

“There’s nothing. Apart from us,” signs Atalanta, squinting as though she might decipher something if she really tried.

Jasyn pulls up the hood of her cape to give her skull a fighting chance against the hail firing between the walls and jumps from the wagon.

Now they’re swimming in shadows and hail-obscured headlamps, the thread of furrows they had been following are lost to the dark. Perhaps the unsettled weather had created a trick of the light. Perhaps that’s all the figure in the shadows had been.

Jasyn’s panic amplifies, and the hailstorm thickens. Whether the former is causing the latter is as unclear as the way forward. She takes Algid and Squall by the reins to lead them, but they resist. Perhaps they’re reacting to the assault of hail, but Jasyn has never known them not to forge forward, no matter the circumstance.

If they have no trail to follow, how are they to find their way to the other side, let alone their way back?

Jasyn clambers into the wagon cabin and reclaims the ice-sword, grasping the hilt with her cape. The unwieldy blade unfurling is the last thing she needs right now.

“What are you doing?” signs Atalanta, her face full of concern.

“I need to get a better look.” They need to get moving in the right direction, fast.

With her shoulder injured, Jasyn can only awkwardly hoist herself onto the wagon’s flat roof. As she stands, the wind scrapes her cheeks and the hail hammers against her hood. She’s almost tall enough to peer over the surrounding walls, but not quite.

Squaring up to the closest wall, with a running jump, she leaps, spiking the inert ice-sword into the top of the embankment. With no strength in her shoulder, she can only use one arm to anchor herself in place.

Heavens. Not the easiest task. But it’s enough.

Her new outlook allows her a panorama of the snaking maze. If the situation weren't so daunting, she might be impressed by the angular formation. If not for the sharpness assaulting her eyes, she might commit the maze to memory, and puzzle out which way to go. If only she could see the night sky, she could let the Astro-pyxis guide them. But with the blizzard enveloping them, it's not possible to fathom the arrangement of the stars, or which path leads to the entrance, which to the exit, and which to the mind-knotting in-between.

Before she can work out the least painful way down, the walls shift. The entire labyrinth shudders, buckles, folds in on itself. Her equilibrium jolted, her stomach considers the same.

With an almighty crack, her wall topples like an axed filament tree, sending her backwards and threatening to crush her. Unhooking the sword, Jasyn plummets, landing back first with a thud in the middle of the wagon roof, atop an uncomfortable bed of hail.

Pulsating pain from her injured shoulder is overshadowed by the collapsing wall looming over her.

With crossed arms, Jasyn protects her face and torso. The crushing sensation she expects is usurped by a mighty crunch and new darkness.

Buttressed from falling further, the wall leans against its opposite.

Jasyn allows herself an exhale. On the off chance the lumps from the sky are the result of her emotional landscape, she heaves several deep breaths, but it does little to calm the storm.

Atalanta leans out from the wagon, signing for Jasyn to return to safety.

Orbs of hail punch into the mighty labyrinth walls and the frozen ground in an ice-buckling fashion, serving the unwelcome reminder of the lake below and the possibility of plunging into the icy unknown.

Algid and Squall whinny and screech as the pellets swipe at them.

It suddenly doesn't matter where the tracks are, because the insistent precipitation glazes over them.

Out of the corner of Jasyn's eye, movement flutters in the shadows.

A human shape.

Unease settles in her bones like a warning.

"Who's there?" she calls, only to be met with the return of her own voice.

Atalanta reaches out, but Jasyn is too preoccupied with trying to work out whether the mysterious shape in the shadows is a helper or a hazard.

The figure flits away, moving with the kind of grace born of knowing the way through this maze, rather than someone condemned to be lost in it.

The knowledge they need...

Scooping up the ice-sword, gripping its hilt and ignoring the buzz it gives her, Jasyn uses the implement as a torch to light her way as she pursues the shape in the shadows.

"Wait," she calls out while chasing them around one, two, three turns, dodging the falling sky debris. Debris the fluidly moving figure seems to care nothing about.

The gale screams through the tunnels, warning her to turn back. Only when Jasyn stops to chase her breaths does she realise there's no figure within her sights – but also that if she was lost before, she's even more so now.

She hadn't meant to stray so far.

Such temperatures can tax the body to the point of hallucination. Perhaps that's what this is. She's at the mercy of being frozen and her body's ability to deal with it. If she wasn't so panicked, this situation could be considered ironic, given her abilities with ice.

"Atalanta, can you hear me?" she calls, but the gale squeals louder, drowning her out.

She turns one way, and another, around one corridor and the next, fearful she's lost both her direction and her mind.

The walls are buckling. How long until the ground does, too?

The sky churns and Jasyn has no doubt that it's at least in part because of her. Ice-pellets chipping away at the barracks, threatening to bury her, she attempts to rein in her galloping breaths and sinks to the frozen ground.

It's her fault for getting so turned around in the first place. That Atalanta and Peleus are so close by and yet lost to her, ties her stomach in knots. That the time her parents may have – *if they still have any* – dwindles by the second, doubles the knot. That she's being unrealistic about their chances... That they all might die because Jasyn got lost in a labyrinth, turns the knot into a noose.

THIN ICE

Above the assault of wind, rain and tumultuous thoughts, a voice finds its way, smooth, lyrical and sweet. The words are not of Iolcian tongue, and only when the echo returns on the twisting gale do the sounds unwind in the language Jasyn understands.

“Jasyn of Iolcus. Listen to me.”

The figure materialises amongst the slicing rain, gaining more definition as she steps closer. She looks about Jasyn’s age, with delicate features and shadow robes not of this world. Mere paces away, the mystery woman’s eyes sparkle, flickering purple flames. Such a captivating sight, Jasyn’s breath catches in her throat. There’s a presence about her that suggests power. Something elemental. As if she could – with a smile or a frown – entice flora to grow or turn a world to ash.

Jasyn’s not sure whether she wants to be closer to her, or further away.

Aside from roaming these unforgiving corridors, there is something odd about her. Only when she lowers her hood, unleashing locks glistening like a stream in moonlight, does Jasyn notice that nothing about this woman moves in time with the wind-tunnel gusts.

While Jasyn’s cape and fabric layers whip in all directions, the figure before her is still – as if she’s not here at all. She kneels within arm’s reach.

“Do not run from me.” The echo instructs as the purple of her eyes ripples like flame. The woman touches Jasyn’s face,

but only the ice of the blizzard presses her skin. The impossibility steals her breath.

“Stand up,” she says. “Stand up, or no one will be saved.”

With the figurative kick she needs, Jasyn stands. She doesn't question how this person, this apparition, knows anything of her mission, but she speaks the truth.

“Listen to my voice. Follow the sound.” When Jasyn looks up, the figure is already impossibly far ahead, her glowing eyes flickering like lanterns to light her way. “Let your light guide your path,” says the voice, its echo dying on the wind.

Jasyn had almost forgotten the ice-sword, inert on the ground. As soon as her palm touches the hilt, it fizzles to life, sending a shock of light across her.

The wind whistles and the eerie lyrical sound of her own name tugs at her to follow the stranger's path. At each crossroads, Jasyn listens for her name and seeks out the amethyst eyes, following in each direction they invite her.

It takes only five turns to rediscover the wagon, the wall of ice levered above it. A wave of relief is short-lived when she spies Atalanta crumpled out in the open, mere paces from the carriage.

Jasyn's heart stutters but her steps do not. She forgets about the figure and the strangeness of the circumstance as she launches to Atalanta's side.

There's a bloody blemish on her temple. She must have been knocked unconscious by the hail. It must have just happened, for Peleus is only now hazarding out of the wagon to help.

Jasyn summons him as she scoops Atalanta up and places her into the safety of the wagon's cabin. Their surroundings shudder, an unobtrusive reminder that they need to hurry.

“Where'd you go?” asks Peleus, but there are more important things to focus on.

In the relative shelter of the wagon, Jasyn checks Atalanta over. A bump on her forehead with a tiny blood line across it

makes clear where the offending hail hit. But her pulse beats strong and her breaths warm Jasyn's cheek. Atalanta gasps and groans as she stirs, her hand gravitating to her injury.

"You're okay," Jasyn tells her, because she needs it to be true.

Retrieving a smooth chunk of hail from outside, Jasyn wraps it in an off-cut the sword had been stored in and guides it to Atalanta's forehead.

"This should help the swelling," she says, before adjusting the blankets to support Atalanta's head.

"I'm fine," Atalanta starts to sign, only to be cut short by a wince inspired by either her hurt shoulder or her head. "Not sure how many pieces I'll be in by the time we get to the Ice City," she adds, attempting a smile.

The screeching weather and groaning ice invites the question of their escape from this maze. She guides Atalanta's hand to hold the ice pack in place before returning outside.

Reclaiming the sword, it blossoms at her touch. She takes her place in front of the horses where her sword cuts through the shadows like a beacon, finding the furrows that will lead them on. Where they are hidden by hail, Jasyn follows the nicks in the walls left by previous vehicles. Where neither are visible, the flame-eyed figure, her shadow-gown trailing like flags in a light breeze, offers a distant hint.

Not one to believe in apparitions, and much more convinced that she's suffered a few too many knocks to the head, or some sort of internal imbalance resulting from the cold, Jasyn is loath to follow. But with rational options thin on the ground, the irrational will have to do.

With her sword-torch and the strange figure guiding the way, the wagon travels the final corridor. A matter of metres from the gateway to the icefields, with questions burning in her mind – *Who are you? How do you know the way? Are you real?* – the mysterious figure dissipates on a gust of wind.

Across the threshold and into the icefields, Jasyn pauses to look in each direction. The woman is definitely gone. Only an

expanse of icy lake fans out before them. *For hail's sake.*

The wagon door clatters open and Atalanta emerges, nursing her sore head. Though she's frowning, seeing her capable of coordination brings Jasyn relief.

This being so, she expects the skies to clear, but they continue to churn in coils of light and dark.

"It's okay, Jasyn. We're out of there. We're okay," Atalanta signs.

"I don't think this is me..."

The blizzard shrouds the horizon in every direction. So much for looking to the skies to guide them. Atalanta closes her eyes and angles her head in such a way that Jasyn knows she's scanning their surroundings.

"That way," she signs.

"What's that way?" asks Peleus, but the answer is cut off by a barrage of hail the size of cannonballs punching down into the icefield, forging vertical tunnels to the frigid, crystal blue waters below. Each puncture in the ice threatens to swallow the wagon whole.

The icefields separate, tearing into pieces.

"Spread out," Jasyn tells them. "Out of the wagon, Peleus."

"It's safer in here," Peleus calls out.

A chunk of ice the size of a cottage roof rears up, shoving the wagon an unsettling distance and turning Peleus a shade of Corinthian green.

Algid and Squall scramble to regain their footing as a back wheel teeters over the edge of the broken ice.

"If the wagon falls, I'll cut it loose."

At Jasyn's words, Peleus swiftly hops out of the cabin.

As they hazard through the icefield, the cracking surface taunts them with each step, threatening to send them into the burning liquid-ice below. Jasyn is put in mind of a mouse

treading across an internally shattered icehouse pane, the ground about to fall away at any moment.

The increasing torrent forces them to pick up speed.

Ice cracks under the perforation of hooves and hail. The terrain shifts. Barriers of ice rear up. Each new fault threatens to knock them over or tilt them between the gaps.

Driven by instinct, Algid and Squall find their way through, dodging the parting terrain.

A cavity cracks.

The wagon's back wheels slip into the chasm. The force jolts Algid and Squall backwards, snatching the reins from Jasyn's grasp, tugging her from her feet and slamming her to the ground.

Her landing has her peering unwillingly into the glacial-blue rift of the breaking terrain. Hooves scrape as the weight of the wagon tugs them towards the abyss. Axles groan in protest.

"What do we do?" Peleus's voice is high with emotion.

Jasyn might be able to reform a cracked icehouse pane, but this is far beyond her reach.

Lifted to her feet by Atalanta, she reclaims the sword and raises it, ready to cut the lines to save her equine friends. But a berg of ice rears up, knocking them forward on their ice-raft, shunting the wagon over her.

She expects pain – hooves bruising flesh and crunching bones – but none materialises.

She whips around to inspect their way forward. The curtains of ice-mist part enough to unveil an angular forest, elevated on a hillside. Whether it's real, or a trick of the blizzard, Jasyn hopes they live long enough to find out.

A runway of unbroken ice lies between them and their destination.

"This way," Jasyn insists, making quick work of leading Algid and Squall.

They all run.

Fault-lines branch beneath wagon, hooves and feet. The cataclysmic breaks resound like submerged metal ropes snapping, lashing at their heels.

They don't stop until they're up the hill and within the dense natural shelter of trunks and branches. Only then do they all – two and four-legged alike – breathe sighs of relief.

"I don't ever want to do that again." Peleus scowls as he leans against the dented vehicle.

Jasyn checks in with Atalanta with a questioning brow, receiving a "don't worry about me" nod in response. They both ruffle Algid and Squall's manes, thanking them and checking them over. Aside from ice caught in their manes, the duo are relatively unscathed thanks to their thick hides.

"We need this storm to be over with or we'll never catch up," Jasyn signs, peering beyond the branches to their blizzard-torn surroundings.

"Even military vehicles won't be moving in this," signs Atalanta.

Jasyn nods. She hates the idea of being still when there's an uncertain timer ticking, but to continue on in such a skull-breaking storm would be to end their journey in more ways than one. The reinforced military vehicles might deal with the assault of ice-rocks, but the thick mist would likely stop them in their tracks. Of course, there's a chance the military are beyond the storm, but all Jasyn can do about that is worry.

"Think you can maybe let third wheel over here in on the conversation?" Peleus scowls at the two of them.

Jasyn takes a subtle, deep breath before answering.

"No vehicle would press on through this. Not even the Ice King's military. We'll only perish if we try."

"About time we had a hot meal, isn't it?" says Peleus.

Jasyn nods, shivering and half expecting her neck to crack like ice. They should find warmth.

Peleus takes three bold strides into the woods before hesitating. Each angular tree is without greenery, as though the woodland is dead, or each tree has formed against the odds in twisted retaliation against the cold. It's as if he's remembered that this world is out to get them.

"This way," says Jasyn, nodding to a better way forward where the trees are far enough apart to allow the horse-drawn wagon a path into the gnarly woods.

The glint in Peleus' eyes suggests he wants to rebel, but a glance into the shifting shadows of the way he'd chosen has him grunting, turning, and following as Jasyn and Atalanta lead the hunt for a sheltered clearing.

A SHOT IN THE DARK

Deep in the Dead Woods, they find a clearing.

With a nudge from Atalanta, Jasyn asks how Peleus is doing. “Never better,” he responds, and proceeds to unholster his axe-knives and hack at trees in a murderously gleeful fashion under the pretence of sourcing firewood.

Meanwhile, Atalanta makes quick work of building a firepit. Together, they get the flames going, and it’s not long before crow carcasses (packed by Peleus) and a potato stew are cooking.

Freed from their harnesses, the horses snuffle about in search of their own sustenance and comfort. Having survived the wilderness for many sun-orbits while Jasyn and her parents were in the mountains, they’ve always been adept at finding what they need.

While Peleus stokes the fire, Jasyn settles by Atalanta to inspect her cut and swollen temple.

“It’s fine,” signs Atalanta, but with a mere look Jasyn tells her not to be so stubborn.

Shuffling along the fallen trunk to sit closer, Jasyn digs into her carry sack for medical supplies. Wind whistles up above, ice lumps clipping the treetops. It only serves to make down here, by the campfire with Atalanta, cosy, removed from the chaos.

“Where did you go?” signs Atalanta as Jasyn retrieves a vial of disinfectant and clean gauze.

Logs crackle and embers burst as Jasyn stares into the firepit. Numb, pained and confused in equal measure.

“I guess I took one turn too many,” she says, forcing a smile that doesn’t last. A breeze passes between them, snatching it away. “How’s your shoulder?”

“How’s yours?”

The pain is both a sharp sear and a dull ache.

“Fine,” says Jasyn.

Atalanta quirks a “don’t be so stubborn” eyebrow.

“It feels like an ice-spear’s been stabbed through it,” admits Jasyn.

Angling towards Atalanta on their shared seat, she cradles her cheek with one hand, dabbing her temple with disinfectant with the other. Atalanta winces, grasping the hand at her cheek, pressing it closer.

For a moment, the air – *everything* – is still and calm. An electric buzz ripples beneath her skin as Atalanta leans closer. Jasyn’s breath escapes her as their lips are about to touch–

“I mean, please don’t mind me,” says Peleus on the opposite side of the firepit. “I’m just existing over here.”

The grimace Atalanta throws him has Jasyn stifling a grin.

“So, how did you know the way out?” asks Peleus. “I couldn’t see a thing. Seems like you had the route fairly well sussed.”

The hail, smaller now, whistles across the tops of the trees. Staring at it too long has Jasyn’s head spinning. She breathes herself back to steadiness as she warms her palms by the fire.

“There was someone in there with us,” she says, uncertain whether that is objectively true. “A woman guided us. You didn’t see her?”

The fire spits.

“And where is this woman now?” asks Peleus, a disbelieving eyebrow raised.

“When we reached the gateway, she was gone.” Jasyn is aware she sounds like she’s had one too many hail stones to the head.

Atalanta scowls thoughtfully.

“Hmm,” says Peleus, stuffing crow meat into his mouth. “Cold must have got to you.” He chews, but not enough. “So, you have a plan yet?”

The fire spits double.

The wind howls up above. Does she have a plan yet? She takes a breath.

“If they’re alive, we save them. We make sure what happened never happens again.” That’s not a plan, she knows that. It’s a statement of intent, vague at best.

“Hmm,” says Peleus, again. When he starts to shuffle through the images and recordings on his Trading-Shard, Jasyn assumes he’s lost interest in the conversation. But he looks up. “Make sure it never happens again? How exactly do you propose to do that?”

It must sound like she has some sort of death wish. Perhaps part of her does. Dying would end the ache in her chest, the twisting in her stomach, the burn in her throat and the despair spreading through her. She sighs inwardly. Such glib and morbid thoughts help no one.

She might have no place in this world, but she at least wants to make it better. *How* remains a mystery. And yet, the words tumble out:

“Confront him.” Jasyn doesn’t even want to say his name. Him. That man. No. *That murderer*. The one who ripped her family and so many others apart. “It’s his army. He’s responsible. He destroyed our lives, our homes. I want to find out why, for what purpose.”

Peleus raises an eyebrow. “You think you’ll get an audience with the Ice King?”

“From what I understand, he’s been looking for me. You don’t think he’ll see his niece? The ‘ill-starred child after his

throne’?”

Peleus stares at her, a piece of crow hovering between plate and mouth.

“Are you?” he asks.

“What?”

“After his throne?”

Before Jasyn can answer, Atalanta cuts in, simply, with gestured words that clearly say:

“He’ll kill you.”

Flames crackle.

“His guards weren’t exactly out to protect the village,” signs Atalanta. “We’ll be risking our lives for ghosts.”

Hail whistles above the branches. Jasyn’s jaw tenses. Every other muscle, too. She doesn’t want to admit Atalanta might be right.

Peleus’ eyes ping between the two of them.

“Yeah, what she said,” he says, pointing to Atalanta. “That is, if what she said is *He’ll kill you*? But also, if you do want an audience with the Ice King, he only emerges from the palace for The Games. He enjoys a good bloodbath as much as the rest of us.” His tone is more chipper than the topic calls for.

Jasyn and Atalanta share raised eyebrows. Not noticing, Peleus continues:

“Even for the duration of The Games, he watches from his royal box, far from any crowds. He leaves his tower only to congratulate the winner – who is, invariably, his daughter, Princess Acasta. The Ice Princess. Otherwise known as *The Gladiator Princess*. She’s a formidable opponent. Some call her the *Princess Killer*. Too many names, I know. But seriously, she killed her own sister to claim the ice-sword for herself. Anyway...” Peleus tilts his Trading-Shard until it displays the looping image of the armoured princess, her sword similar to Jasyn’s own.

Jasyn's mind rebels at the idea that this person is a blood relative. The princess' face is masked by armour. Her colour scheme – according to Peleus, all the gladiators have a set range of colours – is Iolcian black, blue, white and silver. The odd detail of a white-quartz pendant draws Jasyn's eye; a misshapen oval not unlike a skull, with circuitry glistening within the quartz.

Jasyn's eyes skim over gladiator 'stats': Her UNDEFEATED CHAMPION status, the number of wins that entails, and some other inane facts, likely designed to make her seem more impressive. But one detail catches in Jasyn's throat like a sharpened crow bone. Not only is Ice Princess skilled in the arena, she's also WARDEN-GENERAL OF THE IOLCIAN GUARD. The military. The highest rank other than the Ice King.

She's just as responsible for recent atrocities as he is.

Until this moment, Jasyn had thought it impossible to hate anyone as much as the Ice King. She has never wished anyone dead before. She has already, all too recently, taken lives, but envisioning the event and fighting for your life are two different beasts. The ill-intent claws under her skin like frost-ants.

"What are you suggesting?" she asks, clenching her ice-infected palms in an attempt to melt the uninvited formation. She inhales deeply to calm her inner frost-ants.

"I'm not suggesting anything," says Peleus. "I'm merely acknowledging that you want to confront the Ice King, and now you know where he'll be."

The glare Atalanta trains on him is liable to draw blood.

It would be fair to say Jasyn knows little of the Ice King other than his occupation of a stolen throne, his infamous frosty demeanour – *is he self-aware enough to see the irony?* – his supposed protection of Iolcus, and his murderous military and whatever Peleus has recently told her. Hera would refer to him sometimes, but she mostly talked about the time before his reign, when things were *good*. Mostly, aside from bland references to the weather, the Ice King is a subject upon which

no villager would speak. Probably for fear of being reported. Brutal monarchs aren't well known for being understanding of opposition, nor for their ability to see reason.

"It would be suicide to even attempt getting close," signs Atalanta.

"If she's saying his guards would mow you down before you get within spitting distance," says Peleus, "she might well have a point."

The fire spits.

"We need to be careful. Clever," signs Atalanta.

"What's she saying?" Peleus demands.

"*She* is saying she thinks you're an impatient idiot." Atalanta gestures at Peleus.

Peleus blinks. "What?"

Atalanta's eye roll lights Peleus' short fuse, setting him in motion, marching towards her.

"You know what? You're lucky my village respected the fallen monarchs, or you'd both have been dead ten sun-orbits ago."

Jasyn stands between them, her inner frost-ants biting her every nerve.

The sky growls, loud enough to startle Peleus into retreat.

"Steady on." He smiles at Jasyn as if it were all a ruse to toy with her.

In amongst Jasyn's pile of belongings, the hilt of the ice-sword glowers with a crackle of storm.

"What is wrong with you, Peleus?" asks Jasyn. His phrasing – *my village* – would suggest there's resentment and blame bubbling beneath his surface.

Before Jasyn can achieve some sort of resolution, as quick as a whip, Atalanta draws her bow and – *thwack!* – drops to her knees.

Jasyn's nerves bristle with panic. *Has she been hit?* It takes a second to catch up to the fact that Atalanta is clutching her shoulder, and that it's her recent injury causing her pain.

Atalanta's arrow – lodged in a tree at the clearing's edge – anchors someone or something. Whoever or whatever it is, they let out a whimper.

"I'll gut you like a hog," Peleus promises as he launches towards them, axe-knives at the ready.

"*Bloody hail.*" Jasyn out-strides him and grasps his arm, stopping him mid-strike.

Her sword wielded like a fiery torch – she must have grabbed it by instinct – sheds white-blue light across the boy tugging at his arrow-pierced sleeve, anchored in the tree.

From the spilled stolen goods – a couple of potatoes, a plucked crow – it's clear the boy was only after food. He's younger than them, albeit with a scowling brow beyond his sun-orbits. His face is bruised; the hail must have pummelled him. His oversized outer jacket, a hard shell with soft layers beneath, would have helped protect him.

Uncertain whether to look to the man trying to murder him, or the lump of royal relic in Jasyn's grip, he settles on the latter. Fright, admiration and awe twinkle in his eyes.

"Tell me why I shouldn't hack this savage to pieces?" Peleus's arm strains against Jasyn's grip.

"Hack me to pieces?" The boy laughs sardonically. "And you think I'm the savage?"

Jasyn smiles. She likes him already.

"I can get you in," the boy declares, leaving a silence to follow, as if they should know what he's talking about. "To The Games. I can get you in."

Peleus's arm slackens a little. Jasyn keeps a grip on him, in case he changes his mind, or, worse, is bluffing.

"You can't even sneak a bite to eat in the dark." Peleus grimaces and the boy responds by presenting Peleus with his purse.

Snatching it back, Peleus checks his belt. It *is* his purse. He counts the handful of precious therma-stones, making sure they are all there. The boy almost smiles at his mini-victory.

“I can get you Permits. You try to step into the stadium without them, you won’t even have time to regret it. Let me travel with you and I’ll get you into The Games.”

“It was just talk,” says Jasyn. “And we’re not going to hurt you—”

Peleus raises a defiant eyebrow, but grumbles away his annoyance.

“—so don’t feel the need to promise help you can’t provide,” says Jasyn.

“But I want to help,” says the boy.

“You don’t know us,” says Jasyn, sharing a brief look of bemusement with Atalanta.

“Do I have to know someone to want to help?” The boy doesn’t wait for a response. “Besides, I’m not stupid. You’re the lost heir. You want the Ice King removed from the throne. Why wouldn’t I help?”

THE NAVIGATOR

Slop! Peleus dollops potato stew onto a slate and grudgingly passes it to the boy who's barely succeeding in keeping his eyes averted from Atalanta, whose top half is – out of medical necessity – down to only her vest.

The boy's cheeks blaze red.

With the firelight sparkling in Atalanta's eyes, and memories of their night together whispering beneath her own skin, Jasyn fears she's blushing, too.

As delicately as she's able, she sets about rebandaging Atalanta's injured shoulder. The sudden arrow release might have been on target, but it's opened a wound that's barely had a chance to heal. By some miracle, the ice-spear might 'only' have punctured flesh and not bone, but it's still a wonder she'd managed to use her bow at all after such an injury.

But that's Atalanta; always a mystery.

"What's to say you don't hand us over to the Ice King's guards?" says Peleus in a manner that suggests he and the boy will never be friends.

"You want the Ice King knocked from his pedestal?" the boy manages, between bites of potato. "I'd wager I know the Ice City better than you. I know people. Good people. All I need is for you to trust me." There's a twinkle in his eyes, inviting them to do exactly that.

"You were following us." There's unmistakable accusation in Peleus' tone.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” the boy begins, as if on a mission to rile him. “I’m heading to the Ice City, like you. When the skies turned, I knew I had to find shelter. When I got closer to the woods, I saw smoke from your fire.”

To avert civil war, Jasyn chimes in: “You found your way across the icefield?” It *is* impressive.

“I’m an excellent navigator.” The boy grins.

With the new bandage in place, and Atalanta returning to her over-layers, it’s about time they all introduced themselves.

“I’m glad you made it through the storm,” says Jasyn, before Peleus can continue the battle of words. “I’m Jasyn.” The boy nods. “This is Atalanta.” His cheeks blaze. “And...” Jasyn pauses, expecting Peleus to fill the silence. When he doesn’t, she continues, “...this is Peleus.”

“Tiphys,” says the boy, warming his hands by the fire.

“Tiphys?” Peleus spits the name.

“I’ve never met someone your age before,” says Jasyn. “Well, not since I was your age.”

“I’ve never met a lost heir before.” Tiphys grins.

Though it’s meant as a joke, the concept sits uncomfortably with Jasyn.

“Have you travelled far?” she asks.

“Further than intended. I hitched a ride and ended up going the wrong way.”

“Yeah,” says Peleus, not missing a chance to hack with a figurative axe-knife. “You sound like an excellent navigator.”

“I assumed the trucks would be headed to the Ice City, but they went...” he pauses as though troubled or searching for the right word, “...the scenic route.” His sour expression suggests it wasn’t a welcome detour. “I was hidden in a gap between the axle and *whatever the underside of a truck is called* – trucks aren’t my thing.” He swallows as if the food has lodged in his throat. “I saw what happened to your village.”

There's a note of sympathy in his voice that Jasyn appreciates.

"I saw *you*," he adds, a glimmer of awe returning to his eyes. "I waited until the mist was thick enough that I could get out from under the truck without being seen. And that brought me to the edge of the icefield."

"Were there people in the trucks?" asks Jasyn. "Did you hear anyone? Are they alive?"

"The gales have been strong. I couldn't hear anyone." Tiphys offers an apologetic frown.

The gales have been strong. There's still a chance. It's not something Jasyn can dwell on right now.

"Why are you heading to the Ice City?" signs Atalanta and Jasyn translates.

"My father works the skies—" says Tiphys.

"Past tense, surely?" interrupts Peleus.

"He's an astronaut?" asks Jasyn, partly to distract from Peleus' goading but mostly because she wants to know.

"He's a Navigator. Trained at the Astro-Academy." Tiphys beams with pride. "The brave take to the skies," he announces, like the slogan it is. "That's why I'm going to the city. To be an astronaut." He grins between his tufts of mop hair.

"Is your brain frozen, or what?" Peleus' lip curls. "The Ice King closed the skies. He hasn't sent a ship in..."

"10.62 sun-orbits," says Tiphys. "I was 4.04 when my father captained the last ship. The Saviour. A thirty-six strong crew -"

"Captain?" interrupts Peleus. "Thought you said he was a Navigator?"

"He's both."

"Yeah, well... Only fools take to the skies," says Peleus, stoking the fire.

Tiphys glowers. "My father isn't a fool, he's a hero."

“And where is he now?” Peleus asks. Tiphys can only clench his fists in response. “What did I say?” Peleus says, flippantly. “Fools.”

Tiphys casts aside his food slate and launches at Peleus with apparent disregard for his opponent’s superior physical stature. Peleus is so startled he merely takes the hit.

When Jasyn and Atalanta step between them, Tiphys’ purse-pouch falls from his belt in the skirmish, spilling therma-stones and circular metal discs across the ground.

Coins. Jasyn has read about such things: a currency back when therma-stones were purely decorative quirks. How the metal turns translucent at Tiphys’ touch, she has little idea. But now isn’t the time for such questions.

“I’m going to find him. You’ll see.” Tiphys’ features strain, trying not to quiver. “You know,” he says, gathering his fallen items and swiping away his tears, “even the best navigators get lost sometimes.”

Atalanta guides Peleus and Jasyn encourages Tiphys to opposing sides of the camp. At Jasyn’s warning glare, Peleus settles beside the firepit. Tiphys does the same. A small circular disc glints in the firelight as he moves it across the back of his fingers with the ease of a magician. The action appears to calm him.

Peleus’ eyes sparkle as he watches the disc.

“Where was he headed?” asks Jasyn. “Your father.”

Tiphys wipes his nose on his sleeve. “A planet beyond our navigable system. It promises the solution to Iolcian ills.” His words sound like a repeated saying, as if they are his father’s words, not his. “A material, a resource, that enables things to grow in impossible conditions. The planet has a numerical signifier, but he called it the Golden Planet.”

Sparks drift up from the flames.

“Nothing but a story,” says Peleus. “Don’t you think we’d have heard about it if such a thing were real?”

“We have heard of it.” Tiphys’s voice is calm, as if he’s decided to let any foul words wash over him. “It’s just that most people think it’s a myth.” He regards the shimmering coin in his palm with affection. “I can find him. If I can get to the skies, I will find him.”

“What makes you so sure?” asks Jasyn.

“Because I’m a Navigator.” *Of course.*



No one objects when Atalanta suggests it’s time to sleep. Peleus wraps up in blankets, clutching his axe-knives for comfort, along with his every other worldly possession (in case Tiphys turns thief again). On the other side of the fire, Atalanta lies on her uninjured side and tucks into a tight ball. Jasyn aims for the space next to her, only for Tiphys to unveil his sleeping bag there first.

That, at least, makes Peleus chuckle to himself.

“Can I borrow that?” Jasyn asks Peleus, pointing to his Trading-Shard.

The suspicious look he gives her suggests he thinks she, too, is capable of thievery. After wrestling with the idea, he grumbles as he hands it over:

“Don’t scratch it.”

Jasyn settles down on Atalanta’s other side. It’s not long before Tiphys and Peleus are snoring, rivalling each other in volume even in sleep. Atalanta’s eyes are closed, her torso rising and falling steadily, her Transonics dimmed but not entirely closed. Alert enough to home in on mysterious and unwanted sounds.

Jasyn angles the Trading-Shard so its light doesn’t glare at the sleeping camp. She lingers over the profile of the Ice Princess – *The Gladiator Princess* – replaying muted snippets of her hidden behind armour, skilfully swiping with her ice-sword. Some snippets capture her non-gladiator attire. Her loose white shirt and grey trousers look like something Jasyn

would wear, only with a finer cut. A reverse pinch to zoom in shows each garment to be adorned with intricate stitching, a clear boasting of her royal status. Jasyn bets the *Princess Killer* has never had to wrap up against the cold. The white-quartz skull-like pendant about her neck only accentuates her wealth and the macabre methods this monarchy live by.

If the ruling family's crimes against her village and Iolcus weren't enough, the twist of Jasyn's gut confirms this woman is her enemy.

After too long watching the princess' looping images, bleary eyes blinking at the information in her profile and wondering what's real and what is fabrication, Jasyn tries to get some sleep.

With gentle snores, Atalanta snuggles closer. Jasyn dares not shift for fear of waking her, but basks in her warmth. With a silent sigh, she stares up at the tunnel of trees framing wisps of mist, stars and sky. Hera had told her about the sky ships that had once harboured in the Ice City, how they visited other planets, traded with them and brought back the creations of other worlds.

Listening to others' sleeping breaths, plagued by a confused mix of sadness and curiosity, Jasyn drifts off, questioning what it would be like to explore the worlds above, and whether the magic of the skies will ever be within her reach.

SINGING ICE

Z
z Z

A giant jagged crown overshadows the landscape. Sharp rocks shear the ice-raft edges, slicing at your chances of survival. The gradient of the river-slope increases, and yet you stop moving.

Fast-flowing water pins your raft in place.

Caught against a rock, you linger long enough to observe the looming rectangle you now know to be an ice-billboard, shuffling through adverts and info-blasts. They are mostly a blur, but there's one that captures your imagination.

The background: a silhouette, shaped like a soaring bird, pointed skyward toward planets and stars and all celestial bodies in between. A thousand glowing orbs. The foreground: someone in a uniform of grey, white and blue. The insignia on their breast pocket... you cannot quite decipher it. Their stance confident, heroic.

Across all this is a selection of shapes – probably words – but you cannot focus long enough for them to make sense. The river flow shoves you on, stealing the stars from your view as you pass under a bridge.

A thunderous tirade hammers from above.

You emerge from under the bridge as a dazzling light swoops past.

Your ice-raft spins. Your unfocused eyes spy beast-like armoured vehicles, their spotlights scanning the dark water

like snow-hawks hunting prey. The deadly lights criss-cross, homing in on your location.

By luck or design, a neighbouring burg of ice shields you.

But this journey wants you to know life will not be easy. Floating ice shunts your raft, tilting it, knocking you into a spin as the disintegrating ice beneath you encounters the assault course of rapids.

But life can be chaos and calm. The latter makes itself known to you, for the first time, as the river slows and you emerge from your dizzying spin.

Free from the industrial smog of the city, the night sky brims with stars. As your ill-focused eyes stare up at them, the distant speck of rising sun is chased by a green haze.

You drift where the current takes you until, finally, your ice-raft lodges in the reeds. There, you can only wait – to be discovered by friend or foe, life or death.

Just as the chill seeps in, beneath your swaddled layers, a bearded face peers over the reeds. A woman with worried eyes, too.

You know now, as you wake yourself from the missing fragment of your returning dream, that these images are your memory. Your father found you. Your parents – the people who have been your parents as long as you can remember – are strangers who found you at the river edge.



Shrouded by night, her breaths strained and her stomach knotted, Jasyn wakes. She tries to stay calm and remain still, to not disturb the others. Her mind rebels: how is it possible that the ill-starred child the Ice King's military had hunted for, was her? Is her? The image of her parents lingers. Rhea and Chiron. Had they changed the course of their lives all for her? Had they hidden in the mountains because of her? Had all the rules and unanswered questions been to keep her safe? They

weren't the fallen monarchs. They were two kind people who took her in and saved her from certain death.

She should feel thankful... and she *does*... but anger simmers, too. For her whole life she has been ashamed of her ice. They could have told her. If she'd understood why she had to hide, that her life and theirs depended on it, she might not have rebelled (well, not *so* much...). Instead, they chose to make her think there was something wrong with her. Though, given that the only other individuals who possess the power of Iolcian Ice are the usurped and quarantined Ice Queen, the Ice King, and his daughter, perhaps in fact there is.

And it can't have been an easy conversation to broach: that her existence is the reason the village and world beyond is missing a generation.

Still. No matter her parents' missteps, they were trying to keep her safe. It's likely too late to show them gratitude or understanding, or to question them, and at the thought that she'll never hear them laughing again, Jasyn stifles a shuddering sob.

Whistling thuds emanate from above as the hailstorm returns to pummeling the treetops. Woodland noises are minimal but ever-present: twigs snapping in the distance, branches creaking as they sway. Wisps of ice-cloud hang like a blanket or a shroud. Between the mist and hail, barely a star can be seen, though, for a moment, Jasyn could swear the Astro-pyxis, the eye of the mountain bear, winks down at her.

The air moves, almost imperceptibly. The song it carries isn't lyrical or inviting. In fact, the drifting notes are more like bubbles popping, the shifting of water. If it weren't for Atalanta's warmth pressed against her, Jasyn might entertain the idea that she's submerged in the lagoon in the Glowing Woods and all recent events are merely some hypothermia-induced nightmare.

Beyond the boundary of the angular woods, the broken labyrinth lake continues its creaking song.

Few get to hear the sorrow-filled sounds of singing ice. The strange song's vibration, accompanied by the occasional

straining of frozen water adjusting, snapping like rope.

With Jasyn's own mind creaking under the pressure, it's as though the ice itself echoes her pain. Or perhaps it's trying to warn her of worse to come. Ridiculous, of course. Ice is just ice. Even if you have power over it, or it over you.

The campfire crackles as it licks light across the dull metal of the ice-sword. Her gaze falls to the glass orb at the hilt, noting the wisps within. Mist curls around their camp, as though they, too, are in a snow-globe.

Jasyn has little idea of the origin of the artefact that mysteriously only responds to her touch. Though she welcomes magic, she doesn't believe in it. There must be some scientific explanation for how it works, but discovering the history of the sword's existence when you don't have a Permit and are wanted dead by the Ice King may be a challenge.

Did her parents discover her with it? From where did the sword originate? Did her bio-relatives find the sword, or create it? An implement of sharp edges can only be intended to cause death, or the threat of death and – by extension – give power.

It's not a purpose Jasyn is keen on pursuing.

Until the attack on the village, taking life is not something she'd ever imagined herself doing. She'd felt it when she charged after the murderers who decimated their village: the tension in her, the hatred, the utter despair, threatening to erupt. On the cusp of chaos, it had channelled through her, finding its release through the sword, a lightning rod for her capabilities.

Is it her or the sword shaping the skies? Perhaps it is both. What would happen if the sword were a million measures away? Would she still have influence over her surroundings? What would happen if she buried it? Isn't that what her parents did? How far would she have to go to be free of the churning skies? Would it help or hinder them in their mission?

Perhaps it's not to do with the proximity of the sword; perhaps it is only to do with the strength of her emotion. She's

grown to understand that her abilities are measured when she is calm. In those moments, the liquid in the ground and air becomes the palette with which she can paint. In anger or distress, the outcome is unpredictable.

Without an instruction manual, the correlation is difficult to know. And mysterious Iolcian ice-swords tend not to come with those.

Could this unimpressive lump of mysterious metal be her way of controlling her abilities, of directing them? Will it tether her, or see her unleashed? She isn't certain which is preferable.

As the voice of ice warbles on the breeze, Jasyn turns to the question of what she'll do if they manage to cross paths with the Ice King. What will she do if he answers the questions of, *Why tear apart a village? Why steal everything and everyone?* There can be no right answer, but Jasyn is determined to find out what the Ice King considers a good enough response.

He'll kill you. Atalanta's words resonate in her thoughts.

She sighs inwardly. Standing up to a murderous Ice King is never going to be a *good* idea. It's merely, unfortunately, the *right* idea.

Jasyn's parents have spent their lives trying to keep her safe. And now she's marching into another mountain bear nest. She's not ready to face a fabled Ice King. Of course, she's not. And she may never be.

If her parents had let her be herself, and not stunted the growth of her abilities, perhaps she would be better equipped. Perhaps she could have stopped the destruction, or at least put up a fight.

Breath catching in her throat, Jasyn's fingers hover above the sword's hilt. If she's to stand any chance of making a difference and not merely orchestrating her own demise, she needs to figure out how to use this heat-forsaken thing.

While the camp sleeps, Jasyn claims the sword with the cloth of her cape, ensuring not to touch the hilt. Knowing well

enough from myths and legends never to follow a sound that's alluring or haunting, or a strange combination of the two, she heads away from the singing ice and further into the woods.

IOLCIAN ICE

Stumbling across tree roots and brambles, once Jasyn is far enough from the campfire for only the vaguest of flame flickers to reach her, she allows the Iolcian ice-sword to bloom. As though it were a torch, she raises it to her surroundings until she finds her target.

The hollow carcass of a deadwood tree.

Measuring her breathing, she squares up to it, touching the blade to the bark. With uneven sparks, it cuts through the timber as easily as a hot poker through snow.

The aroma of burning wood tickles her nostrils.

What else can this thing do?

She gestures pointedly at a tree, as if the sword might be a magic wand, but it does nothing. Thank the heavens she doesn't have an audience.

When the lightning had met her sword and moved through her, it hadn't harmed her. Quite the opposite: she'd felt a connection with the skies. A connection she appears to be lacking right now.

She tries a more pronounced gesture towards another tree.

Nothing.

In tandem with her growing frustration, the sword hilt grumbles with a confusion of dark and light. Electricity lashes across the blade's surface.

Interesting...

Fascinating... Frightening...

What would her parents think if they could see her now, brandishing the weapon they'd kept hidden from her? What would they say about her lack of control?

They may not have been her parents by blood, but they were hers by choice. That she may only see them in her dreams and nightmares thumps her in the gut. Hot tears press the backs of her eyes.

In her mind's eye the sharp-edged tree carcass takes on the overbearing silhouette of an ice-crown-wearing oaf. It's his fault the settlements of the river have been torn apart. It's his fault she'll never hug her parents again.

A gale screams above the treetops.

Jasyn lashes out with the blazing white blade, hacking at branch limbs and slicing the imagined crown. Splinters of wood fly every which way.

A rustle startles her.

She turns, sword raised to strike. The figure in the dark reacts fast, ducking Jasyn's blind-swipe and knocking her into the severed embrace of the tree trunk. The pierced injury at her shoulder objects, a roar of flames lashing her every nerve. Her sword arm pinned against the tree, the light of the glowing blade licks light across Atalanta's face.

Jasyn drops her weapon.

It hits the ground as an inert lump. Illumination rendered nil. The distant campfire no more than a match in the inky depths of darkness, they are surrounded by nothing but their own accentuated breaths.

Hot tears scorch Jasyn's cheeks as her body trembles, Atalanta's weight against her, holding her in place.

Atalanta.

Jasyn wishes she could rewind until their time together in the Glowing Woods. She wishes she'd never overstepped in the mountains. She wishes life, the universe, and everything could have taken a different direction.

Electricity sparks the air, whispering like synapses between the trees.

In grief-filled desperation, Jasyn seeks out Atalanta's mouth with her own. Her hands find their way under Atalanta's layers, only for Atalanta to break from their kiss and guide her back to the surface.

Jasyn attempts to catch her breath, trying not to panic.

Their bodies meld together. Forehead to forehead, Atalanta's thumbs and mouth caress and kiss away Jasyn's tears in the dark, letting her know that now is not the time for passion. Now is the time for Jasyn to crumble and cry in the warmth of her arms. Now is the time to sink down to the base of an obliterated dead-wood tree, quaking, inconsolable sobs absorbed into the crook of Atalanta's neck, wrapped up together in the cocoon of their capes.



As morning light drizzles between the trees, Jasyn lifts her head from the comfort of Atalanta's shoulder. The area behind her eyes throbs from last night's tears, not allowing her even a moment to forget.

Mist lingers. The wind whistles up above, but more gently and without the skull-breaking addition of hail.

They need to get going, or they'll never catch up.

Atalanta wakes with a wince as she adjusts her injured shoulder.

Jasyn fears this journey may lead to something worse than injury. The need to keep Atalanta safe conjures a whisper from her: "You should go home," she signs. "Back to your den in the woods."

With groggy eyes, Atalanta scowls at her, searching Jasyn's face for further explanation, until her focus veers to the thicket. Reaching for her bow, she gestures for Jasyn to be quiet, letting her know, "There's something out there."

Beyond the occasional disconcerting squawks of birds, Jasyn can't hear anything.

With careful footsteps, Atalanta treads around the sword-hacked tree carcass, far less imposing in the light of day.

Claiming the ice-sword with her cape, Jasyn follows until Atalanta motions for her to stop. Deciphering the tracks in the ground, with concentration and calculation, Atalanta adjusts her Transonics. And, not for the first time, Jasyn wonders what it would be like to experience Atalanta's perception of the world.

When Atalanta lifts her bow and arrow, Jasyn follows her line of sight. It takes seconds of staring, but there, peeking out from the knee of a gnarly tree, its movements inaudible to Jasyn's ear, almost invisible against the snow-covered knolls, is the grey-white shape of a snow-deer.

Atalanta lowers her bow.

Another shape takes form slowly, the layers of grey and white difficult to decipher, as a tiny fawn hazards closer to its mother. There's something so innocent about the moment, about a child seeking out its parent, it brings a lump to Jasyn's throat.

Her thoughts clip short as the deer jolts, collapsing in a cascade of red on pure snow.

With a look like thunder, Atalanta trains her arrow on the unseen culprit.

"Gotcha." Peleus looks mighty pleased with himself as he struts from behind a tree to retrieve his axe-knife from the creature with a sickening, skull-breaking crack.

As the fawn cowers among the prominent roots and tangle of frost-berry brambles, Peleus lifts his axe-knife, ready to strike.

Thwack-thwack-thwack—

Atalanta's arrows plant through his sleeve, anchoring him to a tree.

“Oh, for hail’s sake,” Peleus grumbles as Atalanta and Jasyn emerge from the thicket. “You know, this sentimentality won’t see us lasting long.” He grimaces as Jasyn makes slow work of freeing him from the arrows and Atalanta kneels before the shaking creature. So small and lost without its mother.

“It’d be a kindness to kill it,” says Peleus, as if he hadn’t been the cause of its predicament.

Jasyn is beginning to understand now why a friendship between them has never materialised.

“What’re you waiting for?” says Peleus, heaving the carcass over his shoulder and heading for camp. “I’m famished.”

THE SHARP HORIZON

A clunk-clunk-clunk accompanies them as the overhanging deer carcass, strapped to the roof, knocks against the wagon metal.

Peleus snores in the back, pleased with his haul and exhausted from his exertions. With Jasyn holding the reins, Tiphys rides shotgun and Atalanta does her best to encourage the sleeping, drooling Peleus away from her, while the fawn wriggles at her feet, leaning against her for comfort.

Beyond the gnarly wood, the unwelcome mist keeps hold. As if that weren't enough, with five bodies breathing within the cabin, the windows have all steamed.

"How are we going to get anywhere if we can't see the way forward?" Jasyn seethes at herself on the off chance the reduced visibility is her fault. Though, on reflection, that's a rather self-defeating approach.

She wipes condensation from the windscreen. She might be in the driver's seat, but Algid and Squall are the ones putting in the hard work. The least she could do is get a grip on her simmering emotions and not make their task more difficult.

Her eyes flick up to the rear-view mirror.

Atalanta hasn't signed a word to her since emerging from the woods. Her avoidance of eye contact suggests something is up.

“You know, you don’t need the engine to be steaming to get the topography going,” says Tiphys, interrupting Jasyn’s attempts to try to meet Atalanta’s eyes in the mirror. Unveiling a multi-tool from up his sleeve, as though it were a magic trick, he disconnects the front plate of the dash and fiddles with the components within.

Before Jasyn can demand to know what he’s doing, the windscreen lights up with a crackling topographic depiction of the surrounding landmarks.

“All wagons of this type have this feature,” Tiphys explains.

“I thought vehicles weren’t your thing?” says Jasyn.

Tiphys shrugs. “Navigational equipment is my thing.”

Scrolling across the windscreen’s digital terrain, Tiphys mutters to himself, with interest, about the rudimentary representation of landmarks. As his word choice suggests, he seems to find it “so vintage” and “fascinating”.

With a series of scroll motions, Tiphys explores the maps close up and far away. “Guess it’s a while since this thing’s been updated. Apparently, continents were a thing when this had its last refresh. And it’s not even connected to the Ether.”

If Jasyn wasn’t so preoccupied, she would be more interested. Tiphys slows the speed of the digital terrain, arriving at concentric malformed loops indicating higher altitude. One particular portion is overpopulated with symbols.

“That’s where we’re headed,” Tiphys informs her.

Jasyn wipes away the condensation to squint at their road ahead, but there’s nothing visible on the horizon.

The landscape passes in a patchwork of blues and whites and greys. *Very Iolcian*. Unlike the terrain surrounding the village of Ice Lump, there’s no greenery or growth here. The infection of ice is all the more apparent the closer to the Ice City they travel.

Various topics are explored on the journey, mainly in the form of Tiphys’ steady stream of unrelated chatter. Whether

they are listening or not, he tells them that “Ice royals roam freely in the city” and it’s something to do with a key. He tells them he “got into the arena once”, because his father made sure he was “chosen from the crowd”. He would have only been four sun-orbits old then, so Jasyn wonders if his memory has been embellished.

Tiphys tells them he’s from a collection of villages, a river off-shoot where city pollution is channelled and known colloquially as *the arse end of Iolcus*. He explains how they repurpose scrap – old ice-screens, old fabric, you name it – extracting components from the old to make the new. His home village is “hidden away enough” that no one, especially the Ice City elites, has to spend time considering where their *stuff* comes from, nor where it goes once they’re done with it.

Jasyn half-listens, and half-wonders when Tiphys will stop talking. Though the barrage of information would turn many ears inside out, she’s intrigued to find out more about the “creatures that live under the ice and in the ocean”, but Tiphys’ journey through his own history and unrelated facts (or fictions) is not a structured one.

At least his incessant wittering has Atalanta smiling occasionally. It even has her rolling her eyes at Jasyn. *Maybe things are okay...* Perhaps all these emotions lately have her fearing issues when there are none. But when Atalanta does try to smile at her, it doesn’t reach her eyes.

Jasyn tugs the reins, inviting Algid and Squall to stop.

The inertia must have woken Peleus. “Are we there yet?” he asks, stretching.

“What is it?” signs Atalanta to Jasyn, her eyes scanning in all directions until she finds what has captured her attention.

Jasyn climbs out into the frigid air. A strange, uniform, and industrial collection of buildings exist in defiance of their surroundings. The structures may not be of the same design – their ice-panes are hexagonal, resulting in bulbous formations – but their composition is undoubtedly similar to that of Jasyn’s icehouses. If she were to be unkind to the architect, she might liken them to boils spoiling the skin of the land.

Visual appeal aside, she can only guess that the buildings' purpose is similar. Bore holes drilled down to the river beneath the ice, that must be – *or have been* – for irrigation. That there is no one nearby suggests automation or abandonment.

“I can't hear anyone,” signs Atalanta, joining Jasyn.

Hoping Peleus and Tiphys won't kill each other in the wagon, Jasyn hazards a closer look. She and Atalanta show themselves into the nearest bulbous building through a ground-level broken pane.

The icehouse is individually larger than any they have had a part in creating. Jasyn gravitates to the husks of plants left behind. The leaves are bone dry. They've not been looked after in too long. But that itself isn't the worst of the problems.

A discolouration in the leaves. Root rot. Similar, if not identical to the village's blight. Whatever threatened their village, it's not limited by location. How far does the rot extend? Judging by the rows upon rows of withered vegetation, it's wiped this place out, at least.

If the village hadn't been destroyed, if Jasyn had gone ahead and left, would she have left behind a village that – in time – would have struggled to feed itself?

There's little point in dwelling on that.

“We shouldn't stay here,” signs Atalanta, eyeing their little-understood surroundings with suspicion.

Only on emerging from the building and seeing Tiphys staring, does Jasyn see it: looming over the ice-thickened ground that would have once been a river.

She presses closer to get a better look.

The screen of the hail-battered billboard flickers, half stuck on an image that Jasyn knows well. Something she thought to exist only in the realm of her dreams.

A backdrop of infinite space and gleaming stars. A silhouette shaped like a soaring bird: only now, it's clear it's a sky ship, and the heroic figure in the foreground is an

astronaut. The breast pocket insignia that Jasyn couldn't decipher in her dream is AE, the same as the military trucks.

In its current weathered state, the hero has no face, making the advertisement less inspiring and more haunting. The shapes that Jasyn's eyes have roamed before, but couldn't comprehend, are words:

THE BRAVE TAKE TO THE SKIES!

“CARGO”

BY ATHENA ENTERPRISES

BRINGING THE UNIVERSE TO YOU.

NOW RECRUITING ABLE ASTRONAUTS!

Parts of the screen surface have been hacked away, adjusting the tagline to read: THE GRAVE TAKE TO THE SKIES.

With a deep breath, Jasyn takes a moment to align herself with the evidence before her; that her dreams of the river journey are not random imaginings, but distant memories of a voyage she once took.

“That's him. That's my father.” Tiphys beams at the billboard's faceless astronaut who could be anybody.

Beyond the aged promotional imagery, the clouds reluctantly part to display the blemish interrupting the skyline. Something sharp and threatening. In the mountain's shadow looms an uncomfortable amalgamation of rock, metal and ice: unmistakably, the giant, jagged crown from Jasyn's returning dream. Her blurred memory.

The sight of it prickles her nerves.

“The Ice City,” explains Tiphys, as if anyone were in any doubt.

Sure enough, an angular and tarnished signpost at the road edge indicates the direction of IOLCUS CITY, rendered by graffiti to read: ICE CITY.

Dark clouds strangle the Ice City's highest towers. Mist smothers what's below. It's unclear whether the clogging air is

the result of pollution or the weather.

The Ice King is not happy today.

It's unsettling to think that somewhere under the city, there might be strangers who are her bio-parents, locked away for the crime of being on the throne the Ice King wanted for himself. The queen and king's existence intrigues Jasyn. Her parents might have saved her from death, but her bio-parents are the reason she was born in the first place.

Not that she wants to think about that...

"I used to visit here when I was a child," says Tiphys, looking at the blemish on the horizon.

"You are a child," Peleus grumbles.

Jasyn tries to keep focused on forming a plan.

A wide expanse of glacial water surrounds the base of the city like a shimmering noose. Snow-devils orbit the perimeter, dancing like lightning threatening to strike. The thick ice walls encasing the mountain city are steep. Though Jasyn would love an excuse to exercise her climbing abilities, walls of ice are not known for their grip, and their shoulders aren't up to the task. And they would be sure to be seen.

Only a single ice-road bridges across the moat of ice water and unsettled weather. By design, there's only one way in.

"I assume we can't wander in without passing through a checkpoint," says Jasyn.

"It won't surprise you to know only those with Permits can pass through the gates," says Tiphys. "The Ice King and his guards like to keep track of who's within the city walls. If there's another way in, I don't know of it."

"You have a Permit?" asks Peleus, aiming his question at Tiphys. He might undercut his words with disdain, but he asks the odd useful, if uncomfortable question.

Tiphys presses his wrist, showing off the stripe of glowing blue that designates him a citizen and lawfully allowed to exist.

“Looks like me and the kid will be fine,” says Peleus, showing off the blue line in his own wrist. “Just you two are the issue.”

“Tell me exactly what going through the gates looks like,” says Jasyn.

“There are surveillance chambers each side of the gate,” says Tiphys, closing his eyes to step through it. “Guards, with guns. They ask for your reason of visit and length of stay.”

Peleus’ eyes light up. “The Games are tomorrow – that’s a good reason.”

Tiphys ponders. “There’s a scanner line. You have to cross it.”

“On foot or in vehicle?”

“Either. My dad told me the scanners detect how many Permits there are and how many heat signatures. I’d guess they have to add up. And when that’s done, they let you in.”

“Do they search vehicles?” asks Jasyn.

“Not unless they have a reason to,” says Tiphys. “It’s a cold job, guarding the gates. They won’t want to emerge from their surveillance chambers unless they have to.”

“Then let’s not give them a reason to.” Jasyn turns to Atalanta. Her arched brow holds an apology regarding what she’s about to suggest. Neither of them are going to like this. “I have an idea.”

AN ICY WELCOME

When Jasyn had shared the plan, the risks, and the lack of guaranteed success, she pressed the point raised at first light: that Atalanta didn't need to risk the journey, that she should turn back. Atalanta's crossed arms and sullen features – an altogether frosty response – had made for an uneasy atmosphere since.

Which isn't great given that they are now tightly pressed together and unable to communicate for fear of being heard.

It has been ten sun-orbits since they were last hidden in the wagon's storage box together, with vehicles and an unknown threat growling past. Back then, it was fun and games gone wrong that had unintentionally uprooted them from the life they knew. At least this time, the catalyst is not of Jasyn's own creation.

The same cannot be said for their current predicament of being wrapped around each other, shoehorned into a space too small, listening for clues as to whether they're near the city gates.

Her eyes closed in concentration, the orange glow of Transonics warms Atalanta's features. That's what she is to Jasyn: a warm glow in the cold dark. That's what she's always been. Now, their bodies pressed against each other, Jasyn's feelings for her playmate have evolved, intensified, into a contradictory mixture of excitement and calm.

Memories of the Glowing Woods... of their time together in Atalanta's den, the celestial experience of discovering each

other. The joy of knowing they can light up each other's world, mischief and more in Atalanta's eyes, has all the sensations dancing beneath Jasyn's skin.

It's no wonder her thoughts are drifting when Atalanta is literally on top of her, supporting her weight with her elbows either side of Jasyn's head, her thighs hovering between Jasyn's legs. Every lurch of the wagon presses them that little bit closer, and Jasyn understands the phrase *sweet torture*.

While the carriage jolts them, Jasyn soothes her nerves by studying Atalanta's face; her forehead and around her eyes darkened by a lifetime of wind chill, softer skin at her cheeks, where her scarf has guarded against the cold. Soft skin Jasyn's mouth explored for the first time only two nights ago... Her lips... lips that can be stern, or smile or tease, or...

Focus.

With recent, world-altering proof that Atalanta's feelings are in line with her own, such proximity would be fun if they didn't also have to concentrate on the tricky matter of survival. And if Atalanta weren't pissed off with her, all for suggesting she stay beyond harm's reach.

Jasyn shakes her fire-filled thoughts away. Their lives are in the balance. And it'll be her fault if that balance tips.

As per the plan, Atalanta's eyes open and she gives the nod. If her estimations are correct, they will pass through the gateway before long.

Jasyn adjusts her position as quietly as she is able, placing one palm against the base of the metal box and one on the inside of its lid. Turning the air to ice is something she has been able to do, willingly or otherwise, since she was tiny. She never imagined their lives might depend on it. Now would be the worst time for her abilities to hide.

The change in terrain rattles through the vehicle.

It's as if someone has told her to run for her life, but her legs have turned leaden and now she has to decipher what movements add up to the act of running.

She thinks back to spending time with Atalanta, in the Glowing Woods, at their so-called ‘Observatory’ overlooking the village, or even up in the mountains. When it’s just the two of them, she toys with ice and air without a thought.

It’s just them here now, together in what could be their coffin.

Jasyn shakes her head. Such thoughts aren’t helpful. She returns her mind to the time they spent together, to how she would conduct the air into ice; how her muscles would contract, how the coolness of the air ran through her veins.

A frost forms where her palms make contact with the metal. The air crystallises into a film, spanning inwards, encasing them in a soft but freezing cocoon.

At the sudden drop in temperature, their breath plumes.

Atalanta nods encouragement and Jasyn keeps roaming through her memories. Atalanta has never asked her to be different. Jasyn hopes their current situation won’t change that.

Then she panics. The fear in Atalanta’s eyes after the military had destroyed their village. *Is that how she feels?*

What would have happened if the convoy of destruction hadn’t interrupted their lives? After their intimate night, would they have parted ways, having grown bashful or unable to communicate? Would they have spent the day together? And the night? And then the next, and the next? And every day and night for the rest of their lives? Would they have stayed or left the village? If they hadn’t been interrupted, what would be the shape of their lives now?

Atalanta starts to shiver.

That Atalanta is better able to deal with the cold than most is little comfort as she quakes against Jasyn, as if her shivers were Jasyn’s own. Each breath warms the space around them, melting the frost nearest to them. Jasyn is painfully aware that, for this to work, she has to further cool it.

Atalanta’s shaking arms give way, landing her body flush against Jasyn’s, her face nestled into Jasyn’s neck. If only they could be this close under different circumstances.

Ice drips to cool her cheeks.

Focus.

Atalanta angles her face, and their breaths entwine. Her irises lit embers in the glow of her Transonics, she nods encouragement. Her almost-smile tells Jasyn she's okay, or that she's trying to be. Her increased shivers suggest otherwise.

But this is the plan.

Ice crackles as it strains, reformed thicker.

The wagon jolts, sending Jasyn's nose into the softness of Atalanta's cheek. It's hard to describe exactly what Atalanta smells like, but if she has to describe it, she'd call it Home. Atalanta nods against her neck as if trying to tell her it's okay. Or, perhaps, it's a spasm she can't control. Warmth radiates from Atalanta, but Jasyn must be the only one benefiting from it, stealing it even.

The carriage halts.

Beyond the freezing cocoon, a din of authoritative voices rises. Their tone suggests they're the ones who'll decide their fate.

The scrunch of Atalanta's brow says she's doing all she can to remain still. A tough task, when your muscles are jolting independently. Jasyn's hands are crusted rigid with ice. Air rests like knives in her lungs.

A blip from the gateway.

What does that mean? Is it a sound of encouragement, or a warning that they've been found?

With a lurch, the wagon rumbles on. There are left turns and right, enough to have Jasyn thinking they've gotten away with it, that they've succeeded.

Atalanta's breaths slow.

Cold cuts sharp through Jasyn's every fibre. She removes her palms from the iced surfaces of the box, turning her

attention to Atalanta; her chin quivering, teeth chattering, her eyes closing.

Her own heartbeat marching against her eardrums, Jasyn whispers for her to “hold on for just a few more minutes.”

The wagon seems to judder forward forever until it *finally* stops.

Deciphering the source of each creak and clunk and the background buzz of a thousand voices has Jasyn’s head in a spin. Muffled by metal, blankets and layers of ice.

Unwilling to let Atalanta drift further into icy discomfort, or worse, Jasyn shoves the roof of the blanket box, but it refuses to shift. She shoves it harder, with little grace. No space to manoeuvre.

Her heart rate trips over itself.

She might be able to melt the inside of an ice-pane, but doing so in a panic is no easier than threading a needle with trembling hands.

Sometimes Jasyn wonders if Atalanta’s Transonics allow her to hear Jasyn’s thoughts, because at the precise moment she needs to calm, Atalanta lifts her lips to hers. Her mouth is cold, but sparks fire in Jasyn’s veins. Thoughts of their recent intimate explorations, their night together, the shape of Atalanta and how and where she responds to touch, reel through her mind.

Atalanta’s movements have had the grace frozen from them, but the more their mouths press against each other, the more their breath warms the space between them, the more settled her movements and Jasyn’s mind become.

It’s a welcome surprise when Atalanta frees her arm from their bodily tangle and gently tugs Jasyn’s shirt, pulling her closer, intensifying their kiss into something so powerful it could turn ice to steam.

That’s one way to melt ice...

The proximity of Atalanta’s hips, their gentle movement bridging any gap is intoxicating. The ice around them drips

and Jasyn has no idea if it's her doing, or their combined body heat.

Atalanta's frosty demeanour seems to have thawed, too.

The ice encasing Jasyn's palms crackles and slips away, but she dares not place her hands on Atalanta for fear of startling her. But Atalanta has no reservations about slipping her own warmed hand between them.

Her dexterous downward journey has Jasyn wondering whether it's possible for someone with the power of ice to spontaneously combust.

Their impromptu adventure is curtailed as the box lid and melting ice are forced open. Light unleashes, and axe-wielding Peleus and grinning Tiphys peer down at them, informing them in unison:

“We got in.”

PART IV

THE ICE CITY

KALAIS AND ZETES

Tumbling out of the icebox, Jasyn wraps Atalanta in as many blankets as she can find.

As she attempts to hug warmth back into her, Jasyn's line of sight falls beyond the wagon to the overcrowded mess of the city. The sickness in her stomach understands before her mind does that the frozen mound she's looking at is the ice-entombed remains of two people, huddled side by side. City-dwellers step past the obstacle without a second glance. Either they don't see it, or it's not worth their time.

What sort of nightmare is this place? She's never been somewhere so loud; voices and movement and loudspeaker announcements overlay into an all-distracting din.

For Atalanta, it must be torture.

Sure enough, she winces and thumbs her Transonics, dialling them down. The fawn must sense Atalanta's distress or is suffering from his own, for he hobbles out of his snug carry sack in the footwell and climbs into her lap. *By the heavens, that's cute.*

"Where's he gone?" says Peleus, and it takes Jasyn a moment to realise he's talking about Tiphys.

From a shadowed alley at the edge of the city square, Jasyn ventures into the teeming street. The chaos flows around her. The jostle of too many bodies in the available space, the antithesis of their village life, thumps like a drum beating to a fast but unpredictable rhythm.

“I knew we shouldn’t have trusted that little pipsqueak,” Peleus grumbles, climbing out to join Jasyn. Just as she’s about to question why, since the ‘piqsqueak’ got them through the gates, Peleus’ anger diffuses as he’s distracted by the strangeness of their new world.

“Wow,” he says, looking up at congealed building formations, twisted towers, bridges and billboards blocking out natural light.

They’d never really had to look so far *up* in the village. The billboards offer a confusion of slogans: “Work hard” and “Be rewarded” and “All hail the king.”

Her heart thumping uncomfortably, Jasyn takes in an ice-structure, a dozen times as tall as the wagon, glowering over the square. The jagged stalagmite formation of an ice crown leaves no doubt that this vanity piece is of the Ice King. The snow-globe of the statue’s ice-staff contains an oversized timepiece, its ticking lost to the burble of the crushing crowds.

As Jasyn stares up at the stone eyes of the statue, the ticking grows. Or, she imagines it does. The Ice King. *The Tyrant King*. She hates him all the more for this arrogant construction, designed not to welcome but to intimidate all who look his way.

When Atalanta’s hand arrives on Jasyn’s shoulder, the gravity of the gesture worries her. The apparent volume of the clock results not from the mechanisms of her imagination, but from the real and contrasting silence. The entire mass of citizens have ceased teeming through their day, and are, in an unsettling fashion, staring directly at them.

The citizens appear to all be older than the three of them, or at least made haggard by time and circumstance. Is it the trio’s rare youth that attracts attention?

It can’t be that they recognise Jasyn’s likeness to their fallen rulers (if indeed there is any): her face is hidden within the shadow of her hood. It could be the glowing stones behind Atalanta’s ears. Only Peleus could blend in and be one of the crowd.

But the watching faces are agape. A hunger in their eyes. Whatever it is, their plan to arrive under the radar needs rethinking. *Fast.*

Peleus places a hand to his axe-knives. Atalanta thumbs her bow.

A mechanical cranking interrupts the staring contest as mighty industrial gates open. As if the mob's gaze were all a figment of the trio's imagination, the entire city square turns and flocks to the gateway as armed guards emerge.

A masked guard brandishing some sort of Shard or ice-tablet makes notes as his colleague invites select civilians through the gate. Rifle-wielding guards watch over the organised chaos of the jostling crowd from the towers flanking the gates. The metal arch between the towers designates the complex: ATHENA ENTERPRISES.

Jasyn doesn't let relief set in yet. Readyng the horses to guide them elsewhere, the city has other plans.

"This ain't the best place to be parading 'round with walking horse meat," says a figure from the alley shadows.

"Ooh, is that deer steak?" says another, eyeing Peleus' kill strapped to the wagon's roof.

Atalanta's grip tightens about her bow. They don't appear to have noticed the fawn in her shoulder bag yet, but he's wriggling to get a look at the goings-on, so it'll only be a matter of time.

The two figures emerge into the comparative light.

To the casual observer, their androgynous features are almost identical. Their heights are the same, their slicked back dark hair, and their green eyes, too. Both are lean and muscled, but one has slightly softer features.

Trying to decipher whether they are male or female, one of each, both or neither, crosses Jasyn's mind before she dismisses the need as parochial. Their ages are difficult to place. She can only assume that if they were too close to her age (given all she has recently learned about the so-called

sickness and its ‘eradication’) they wouldn’t be parading around with such confidence.

As they lazily approach the group, one wanders past them one way, and one the other. Matching winged tattoos span across their shoulders and down their arms, as severe and as angular as their features.

“Ice City folk are more liberated, I see,” says Peleus with a wolfish grin and bright eyes aimed at the duo’s climate-inappropriate layers.

Jasyn cringes at Peleus being so uncouth.

“If by ‘liberated’ you mean more liable to catch a chill,” signs Atalanta.

Observing them with interest, the duo smirk and it’s not clear whether they understood what Atalanta said or are laughing at her. There’s a feral edge to them. They remind Jasyn of a snow-hawk who’d gotten stuck in the nets protecting her family’s smallholding crops. It’d broken its wing in its struggle to escape. The creature’s sharp eyes had observed Jasyn with the same calculation and wariness she sees now.

It can’t have known she only wanted to help. These two, they hide their assessment better than a snow-hawk. Their surface smiles are almost friendly.

The crowds howls crescendo. Despite the threat of armed retaliation, the citizens push and shove in their desperation to reach the front of the Athena Enterprises queue.

“That’ll be the night shift,” says one of the strangers.

They should get out of here now, before the crowds remember their presence. But Jasyn can’t help air her curiosity.

“What’s in there?” she asks of their new acquaintances.

“What iceberg you been frozen in, Snowflake?” asks the one on the left. Jasyn does not like the tone of anything in that sentence. Particularly *Snowflake*.

“Work,” replies the one on the right.

“What kind of work?” asks Jasyn.

Before she can get an answer, a growling roar precedes the arrival of military and demolition trucks, similar – if not identical – to those responsible for the attack on the village; emblazoned with ice-crown motifs and AE, some with SOS.

The vehicles tear across the square.

“Is that them? Are those the vehicles?” Jasyn asks of Atalanta and Peleus.

The AE trucks grumble through the crowd, not slowing for citizens to stumble aside. The Athena Enterprises gateway barely allows them to scrape through, preventing anyone from squeezing by.

The SOS trucks peel off in a different direction.

To see over the crowd, Jasyn climbs onto the wagon bonnet, ignoring her shoulder’s protest, and visually follows the vehicles path.

On the other side of the square, the SOS truck reverses up to a wall, connecting with some sort of mechanised hatch. From this distance, it’s difficult to discern the details. Distracted, and likely used to the traffic and chaos of the city, the crowd pays the convoy no attention.

Only ten ticks of the statue’s timepiece pass before the SOS trucks unclasp from the wall-anchors and drive on. The canvas of their outer shells flap. The cages within are now empty.

Sudden bullet-claps at the Athena complex shake the square, indiscriminately decorating the ground with blood. Bile rises in Jasyn’s throat. *This place!* The crowds retreat as the heavy gateway cranks shut.

In the chaos, a whisper spreads.

Jasyn scowls at the mysterious wall hatches that no one seems to care about. Her mind ticks over on how best to get through the heavy metal. A sleeve-tug from Atalanta draws her attention.

The citizens within the square have resumed their laser-eyed focus on the 'walking horse meat' and on-display 'deer steak'. Apparently, with one avenue closed to them, the mob has decided that Algid, Squall and the wagon's haul are their next best option.

THE MASKED STRANGER

A single exchanged look is all it takes for Jasyn and Atalanta to start picking apart the knots holding the deer carcass in place.

“Hey, wait a minute!” complains Peleus, but it’s too late. The carcass hits the ground with a sickening thud.

The wing-tattooed duo pounce on it and make light work of hauling it into the alley depths. A swift getaway. It’s time Jasyn and the trio did the same.

The word ‘mob’ has never felt more appropriate. With half the crowd peeling off and pursuing the stolen deer carcass, the other half is closing in on the wagon.

“Get in,” Jasyn instructs as she leaps atop Algid.

Peleus and Atalanta oblige.

A flick of the reins sees hooves rumbling against the street of slippery stone. They bolt down the next alley.

The high-rise, overcrowded, labyrinth of a city is difficult to navigate. Jasyn opts for picking up speed and turning only when necessary.

The occasional startled citizen retreats from their path.

With four legs far superior to two, it’s not long before the pursuing crowds are distant enough that they may have given up. Still, with a fork in the road ahead, Jasyn maintains momentum. After brief assessment, she selects the avenue with the fewest obstacles.

But luck is denied.

Up ahead, the street narrows. There are no avenues in between. There's no way to turn the wagon. Even if there was, it appears local knowledge reigns superior as the mob spills from a side street behind them.

Jasyn looks ahead to confirm her fear.

We're not going to fit...

The wagon's metal edges are already clipping at the narrowing walls. And there's no version of events where Jasyn would consider leaving Algid and Squall behind, so...

"We have to let loose the wagon," she signs through the windshield.

Atalanta scrambles for the burgundy cloth on the passenger seat. Only, she hesitates, confusion contorting her face. Methodically, she checks the cabin.

She holds up the empty fabric for Jasyn to understand: *the sword is gone*.

Oh no...

This street's not getting any wider...

Jasyn throws an accusatory look at Peleus, but his axe-knives are missing from his halter. His purse, too. His exclamations, dulled by the closed windows, are no doubt saying something venomous about the winged, tattooed thieves.

What about the fawn?

Reading the panic on Jasyn's face, Atalanta checks her shoulder bag and holds up the snow-fawn, alive, kicking and inquisitive.

That's something.

Atalanta plucks an arrow from her quiver. Yes. An arrowhead could work. But the wagon is too close to the walls for her to use her bow or even to throw an arrow to Jasyn.

Hail.

Scrunch—

The momentum throws Jasyn forward, sailing past Algid's soft fur.

Thud—

Her body revolts at the impact. Pain radiates from where her shoulder struck the ground.

A double *thunk* from within the wagon indicates Atalanta and Peleus have similarly suffered. Flanked by alley walls, despite Algid and Squall's best hoof-scuffling efforts, the wagon is stuck.

Atalanta shoulder-shoves the windscreen, grimacing with each strike.

Breath forced from her, Jasyn attempts to gain her bearings, only to be rewarded with the impending doom framed by the wagon's undercarriage and the cobbled street.

The wall of citizens closes in with a torrent of approaching footsteps. There isn't much time.

Jasyn's hands shake, ice-mist hazing and swirling around them like a planetary gas giant. The pressure builds at her fists, clawing up her arms. She doesn't know whether to encourage or fight it. *At what point will her balance tip?*

The roaring mob is offset by the growl of an engine in the opposite direction. Still winded, Jasyn observes from the ground as a two-wheeled steaming engine-ice (a bi-ice-cycle, if she recalls correctly) skids to a stop with a spray of ice powder.

Even without the ice, that's pretty cool.

The masked rider observes her for a millisecond. Glinting with intelligence, her eyes peek out above a tightly wrapped scarf, studying Jasyn as though trying to decipher a riddle.

Beyond the masked rider, in the second saddle, is Tiphys. They hop off the bi-ice-cycle. From behind the engine, the rider grabs bolt cutters for Tiphys, who wastes no time in clipping through each harness, freeing Algid and Squall from their tethers.

The pressure within Jasyn diffuses.

Brandishing a tyre iron, the rider struts towards the wagon. (How someone can *gracefully strut* is impressive.) She pulls down her visor as she approaches. Atalanta must understand because she pulls Peleus back from the window and covers them both and the fawn with her cape.

With a swift double strike, calculated and precise rather than powerful, the rider buckles the windshield and about-turns to offer Jasyn a helping hand.

Atalanta and Peleus shove the broken glass and climb out.

Jasyn's senses return to her. Ignoring the aches from her dented exterior, she accepts the hand and staggers upright.

"Follow me," says the rider, her voice authoritative but more delicate than Jasyn had expected. "And cover your face."

With Tiphys in tow, a kick to motor mechanisms sees the rider churning the ice from the cobbles in a jaw-dropping U-turn.

In her shaken state, Jasyn had barely registered that her hood had fallen down. She lifts it to hide in its shadow.

The mob shunts the wagon.

Atalanta climbs onto Algid's back, the wide-eyed fawn still nestled in her carry sack. With a palm to his head, she calms him. With Jasyn's assistance, Peleus clambers atop Squall, before she joins him. Squall grumbles, unimpressed at the extra weight.

The hungry hoard conquers the barrier and Algid and Squall don't even need a heel-kick to know what to do.

Tiphys and the masked stranger take a confident lead weaving through the maze of alleys, with Algid and Squall racing to keep pace, deeper into the sprawling city's shadows.

The black and blue of stalagmite buildings stretch into the sky, an overcrowded, angular forest of metal, ice and rock. Man-made severity with melted edges. The further from the city square they get, the wider and more decorated the architecture becomes. If Jasyn had to guess, she'd say they

were travelling out of the city slums and into an area of affluence.

It's not long before their guide slows, stopping at a gateway, her engine percolating to a low hum. She scans their surroundings before holding her hand to a sensor at the gate. It glows, opens, and she ushers them into the courtyard beyond.

With mosaics and decorative streams, not unlike irrigation half-pipes (only better presented), Jasyn could be convinced they've entered an oasis of calm. It even has a light funnel. Plant pots stand empty. The middle of the courtyard is more like a workshop, with the bi-ice-cycle taking centre stage, and a work bench of tools to match the woman who wields a tyre-iron with confidence.

As the rider dismounts, she removes her visor and unravels the material hiding her face. Her hair, blonde or silver grey, is neatly pinned back. Though it's difficult to tell in a world where hardships cause the creases of time prematurely, Jasyn guesses her to be somewhere around fifty. She peels out of a set of nondescript charcoal overalls, down to cerulean-grey overalls.

How many sets of overalls does one person need? The top layer may have been for warmth, or intended to blend her with the shadows, but the detail that captures Jasyn's interest is the white insignia against blue on her breast pocket: AE.

Is she friend or foe?

The woman's calculating eyes continue to decipher the riddle of Jasyn, before she finally informs them: "My name is Gus. Your friend Tiphys thought you could do with my help."

THE SKIES ABOVE

While Atalanta personifies *competence* and *grace* as she lowers from Algid's back, Jasyn assists Peleus in a dismount that even has Squall whinnying in judgement. Before Peleus can grumble or blush too much, a *ding* accompanies a door opening at the far end of the courtyard.

Two children, wide-eyed with curiosity, squeeze between the parting doors. Gus must be a person of status to have been granted a Permit for not one but two children. They must be younger than Tiphys because they don't seem afflicted with trying to seem grown up. They don't give Jasyn, Atalanta, or Peleus a second glance; all they care about are the horses, thankfully in a more wholesome fashion than the citizens of the square.

"You'll have to excuse my offspring, they've never seen horses before," says Gus, her serious expression thawed. "They've only ever read about them."

"Can we look after them?" asks the girl. "They'll need food and water after their journey."

Gus looks to Jasyn and Atalanta for their permission. It could be something to do with being rescued by her, but Gus' matter of fact, quietly spoken manner puts Jasyn at ease. She nods.

"This is Algid and this is Squall," she says, and the children giggle as the horses nuzzle and snuffle at them.

"The fawn, too?" says Gus, indicating Atalanta's carry sack. "The creature is young. It'll need some milk."

The instructions are to the children who nod enthusiastically. Their gentle approach – patting the horses with quiet care – has Jasyn trusting they’re more than capable.

With bright eyes, the girl and boy accept the fawn from Atalanta, calming the creature with soft words.

“Quite the welcome we received out there,” Jasyn offers as an icebreaker.

“Desperation seldom brings out the best in us,” says Gus as she heads between the parted doors, into a room of bizarrely small proportions beyond. It’s clear she expects them all to follow, but only Tiphys joins her.

“Please, come on in,” she says, gesturing to the tiny room.

“Thank you for your help,” says Jasyn. “But we can’t stay.”

“I’m afraid you can’t leave.” Gus’s tone remains measured and light. Her hands rest at the base of her back, ‘at ease’, as she takes a step back into the courtyard. “The Ice King has eyes throughout the city. If anyone were to recognise you, if they were to figure out that I helped you, my family, my home, will all be forfeit.”

“Recognise me?” Clearly Gus knows more about her than she’d planned on sharing. Her focus swerves to Tiphys who is studiously looking everywhere but at her.

“Even if Tiphys hadn’t told me,” says Gus, interrupting her thoughts. “Even if I hadn’t witnessed you haze the street’s air with ice.” Jasyn can’t read her features. “The lineage in your face is as clear as a golden day.”

Still not aligned with the idea that she is the offspring of those other than Rhea and Chiron, *her parents*, Jasyn adjusts her hood.

“You don’t need to cover your face in my home,” says Gus, before continuing her previous topic. “If common sense and decency don’t stop you from leaving here tonight, the storm will.”

The storm? What storm?

Gus checks the timepiece on her cuff. She couldn't have timed it better as, in that moment, hail hammers against the courtyard's gate. If Gus hadn't mentioned the storm, Jasyn would have assumed it to be the thumping fists of the city mob, or worse.

"A uniquely Ice City-based meteorological ailment," explains Gus, crossing the courtyard and opening a look-out hatch. "They call it the wail and the hail. Some say the Ice King is angry." Beyond the closed gate, wind and hail attack the street. "Others say the Ice Queen is inconsolable, locked in her prison of ice."

Pellets sting Jasyn's cheeks. She reaches out to catch the falling ice. Small and oddly shaped, like teardrops.

"We've braved worse than this." Jasyn melts the handful of hail with the heat of her palm.

"You're in an unfamiliar, unwelcoming city of strange design. Iolcians no longer have a reputation for welcoming outsiders. And you stick out like a shiny cog in a pile of rust. I'm afraid most will only use you to benefit themselves." Gus closes the hatch.

"Already did that. There's nothing left," Peleus sneers under his breath, pawing at his empty axe holster.

"When will it stop?" signs Atalanta, in gestures that can be understood by all.

"It'll die down by morning." Gus doesn't even blink at Atalanta's method of communication. "Now. You've had a long journey. I've had a long day." She returns to the boxroom. "I can offer you food and shelter. Perhaps even some peace and quiet."

Well, that's the nicest way Jasyn's ever been told to shut up.

Peleus joins Gus in the boxroom, utterly convinced. "What kind of food?"

But Jasyn doesn't follow. How can she stay here when people she cares about are out there?

“You’re looking for the military trucks that destroyed your village,” says Gus in a matter-of-fact tone. *How can she know that?*

Avoiding eye contact, Tiphys looks like he’s one step away from inanely whistling.

“Little ice chip really did tell you everything,” Peleus sneers.

“If you’re thanking me for helping, you’re welcome.” Tiphys directs his sarcasm only at Peleus, who instinctively places a hand to his empty axe-knife holster. He settles for grumbling instead.

“It’s a government facility,” says Gus, framed in the doorway. “You haven’t a flame’s chance in an ice bucket of getting in. There’s no point making it this far to end up dead in the street, or worse. Tomorrow I’ll make enquiries. I’ll do all I can to help you.”

Staying put has never been Jasyn’s strength. It would be a fool’s errand to roam unfamiliar, threatening, hail-encrusted streets. But the storm, she’s bold enough to believe she can handle. Steering clear of those who would wish her harm: she might manage that. But putting a family in danger...

Atalanta nods at Jasyn in unspoken agreement – *Gus is right* – and the two of them join Gus, Tiphys and Peleus.

Packed into a room barely large enough to contain them, Jasyn is about to suggest they gather somewhere larger, back in the courtyard even, when her words are snatched away. At the push of a button, a gasp of steam and the clunking coil of pulley-chains, the room soars up, up, up.

The Ice Lumpians startle and attempt to regain their balance.

“You never been in a cube-lift before?” As sure-footed as a claw-goat, Tiphys almost bursts his sides laughing.

Exhilarated, Jasyn lets a smile escape. She and Atalanta regain their footing with ease, while Peleus covers his mouth as if he’s about to vomit.

“This is your first time to the city.” Gus nods as though combining parts of the equation.

So many questions buzz in Jasyn’s head. *Who are you? Why are you helping us? Are you helping us?* She opens her mouth to ask but as they funnel up, breaking through the churning hail clouds, the view through the metal-reinforced glass walls steals her breath.

The ice-plagued city is lost to the hail, replaced by comparative silence.

It’s a different world up here.

The tallest high-rises are few and far between, allowing for the impression that the city is uncrowded, almost peaceful. The Ice Palace prickles the middle distance, like an oversized crystal cluster of quartz. With the ocean of clouds spread out before them, Jasyn recalls how it felt to look out from the mountaintop. The mystery of what lay beneath. The endless possibilities of the horizon.

Her hand brushes against Atalanta’s and she cannot decipher whether it’s the dizzying heights, the upward motion, or Atalanta’s touch that makes her heart trill.

Ting!

The lift stops, unbalancing them anew.

With a swipe of Gus’ hand, the doors open. Jasyn hides her awe, not wanting to seem like a country bumpkin.

They emerge into an apartment of clean lines and homely heat. No wonder – the main chamber, complete with soft furnishings, centres around a therma-place, composed of therma-rocks rather than therma-stones. Peleus’ jaw practically hits the floor when he sees the floor to ceiling ice-screen.

“Hail. You must be melting rich,” he says.

Gus’ curt smile suggests she’s obviously uncomfortable at the remark. Well, *obviously*, unless you’re Peleus.

“Apart from our regular evening hail, we have unpredictable skies on the horizon.” On-screen, the familiar

figure of Lynk the goggle-wearing meteorological forecaster gestures to the Iolcian weather patterns on an animated info-blast beside her. “As you can see, a new weather front has rolled in...”

The direction depicted on the weather map is roughly that of their journey upriver. Is Jasyn herself the new weather front rolling in?

“Sure beats sleeping in those dead woods,” continues Peleus, as the therma-rocks lap blue light across his amazed features.

“Just in time for dinner,” a cheerful voice declares, the owner of which is a man of equal neatness to Gus. “Gus said we might be having guests.”

“This is my husband.” Gus smiles as her husband drapes an affectionate arm around her shoulder.

“Call me Idmon,” he says with a welcoming grin and outstretched hand.

Though uncertain whether they can truly trust these new acquaintances, Jasyn is sure of one thing: she already likes them.

DANGEROUS QUESTIONS

While the family readies the dinner table, Peleus gravitates to the wall-height ice-screen like a snow-jay to a shiny object.

Using the correct gesture, he flicks through the channel-streams. The frenetic images and sounds fill the room as he skips through them with gleeful impatience. Once he finds the stream he's looking for, the sounds become smoother. War drums pound, crowds roar and blood cascades across the wall-screen. The Games have never been known for their subtlety.

Gus offers a thin-lipped smile that suggests she's politely putting up with the intrusion.

"Woooooow," says Gus' eldest child, stunned, possibly scared by the images.

"We're not fans of The Games in this house," says Gus, in a tone that anyone who isn't Peleus understands to be a polite plea to please change the channel.

Atalanta steps in with a hand swipe and the stream changes. Peleus' face turns to thunder, before he seems to recall he's an adult and must repress such things.

Swiping her hand again, Atalanta frowns. It's not that she doesn't know how to use this technology – she's used the basic ice-screen in Jasyn's family home on occasion – but she is out of practice and the gesture she thinks will switch it off changes the stream again and again.

Jasyn can't help but chuckle until she notices the content crackling across the screen: an info-blast, mid-flow. Its subject is a map with Iolcus City at its centre and designated 'hot spots' in the far regions downriver. One of the highlighted zones is over what was once their village.

"...flare-ups of contagion in the outer regions," says the newscaster. Jasyn had never considered where they lived as 'outer' anything. It might have felt like a small place, and yes, she might have wanted to escape it, but it was the centre of her universe for so long. "Containment measures have been taken," continues the report.

"Contagion?" Jasyn scowls.

What are they talking about? Containment measures? Is that why the military were there? Why, then, bring the 'cargo' back to the city? That doesn't seem much like containment...

"No one in the village suffered until the military arrived," signs Atalanta to Jasyn. "What sort of contagion is that?"

"And, thanks to the swift actions of our leader, Iolcus City remains safe," says the sanguine voice of the newscaster.

Gus clears her throat.

"If we can have dinner without talk of contagion" – Gus steps in to switch off the ice-screen – "I would be very grateful."

"But—" begins Jasyn, her fists clenching.

"Any questions you have," interjects Gus, "I will endeavour to answer. Later." A subtle glance to her two preoccupied children lets Jasyn know what they have to talk about is not suitable for young ears.

The injustice of all that's happened, all that is still happening, churns within Jasyn, but so, too, does hunger. And figuring out what to do about the former will no doubt be assisted by solving the latter.

Gus takes her seat at the head of the table. Not wanting to upset the woman who saved them and has risked inviting them into her home, Jasyn joins everyone in taking their seats. The

cutlery and crockery have a more notable shine than the ones used by Jasyn and her family. Judging by how Peleus is admiring the implements, they're finer than anything he's encountered, too. He really needs to stop looking like he's going to pocket all the precious items.

The children watch their guests with silent enthusiasm. Jasyn sticks her tongue out at them, making the girl and boy giggle.

"To unexpected guests," says Idmon as he raises his glass. The rest of the table, grown-ups and children alike, join him.

Having witnessed the state of the industrial scale icehouses beyond the city wall, and the empty pots in the courtyard, Jasyn wonders where this food comes from. Is it from a distant village, one like theirs? Was it taken by force?

A mixture of hunger and politeness encourages Jasyn to consume the bean stew. Mid-bite, she looks up to find Gus and her husband staring. Is she eating weirdly?

"Sorry, it's just fascinating. Your face..." says Idmon, and Jasyn's not sure what to say to that. "I m-mean..." he stammers. "You look like her. Your mother. When she was younger."

Jasyn's last mouthful of stew sticks in her throat like a stone. That she might bear a striking resemblance to people who are strangers is... odd. She gulps berry-wine to soothe her throat.

"You knew my... my bio-mother?" Jasyn's eyes flit to the children, uncertain what she's allowed to ask.

Gus must understand her hesitation, because she smiles at her children. "Who wants an ice-screen dinner?" she asks, as if it's a prize of some kind.

"But we have guests," says the boy.

"Yes, we want an ice-screen dinner," says the girl, scooping up her plate and his and leading the way to the far side of the room, on the other side of the hearth where they settle and gape at the screen.

“I used to work for Queen Alcimede,” says Gus. “Before the Great Freeze.”

Queen Alcimede. Of course, Jasyn knows the name, but hearing it in the context of being her mother has her taking another glug of wine.

“Is it true that they... the fallen queen and king... that they’re locked in ice beneath the palace?” She hadn’t known she was going to ask that until the words were out of her mouth.

“How do you imagine I would know?” Gus’ tone is utterly unreadable.

“More wine, anyone?” offers Idmon a bit too cheerily.

Peleus presents his glass.

“Usurping a crooked Ice King isn’t sky ship science, surely?” Jasyn’s anger percolates through her words. “Why is he still on the throne?”

“You don’t think people have tried?” Gus takes a sip of berry-wine. “When you have the power of ice on your side, there aren’t many who would win a battle against you.”

“Has the Ice Princess ever made a play for the throne?” asks Jasyn.

“If she had, she’d already be dead,” says Gus with a probably subconscious glance at what her children are up to. “That she was even allowed to wield Iolcian Ice at all would have been a calculated decision from the Ice King. If he suspected his daughter to be anything other than loyal, he’d end her without a second thought.”

Peleus stares at Gus as if she’s an ice-screen for his entertainment.

“You have it?” asks Gus, her attention focused on Jasyn. “The Iolcian sword?” The sparkle in her eyes could be intellectual curiosity, something more sinister, or just the wine.

“It was taken.” There seems little point in lying. Jasyn sighs, uncertain whether she’s unsettled, relieved, or feeling

foolish at the loss of something her parents spent so long trying to conceal, even from her.

Gus nods, with a poised, blank expression.

“What do you know of the sword? How it works...?” asks Jasyn.

For the longest moment, Gus studies her. “Not my area of expertise, I’m afraid. Nor yours, by the sound of it.”

Is she disappointed?

“And what is your area of expertise?” As soon as the words leave Jasyn’s mouth, she knows the question is too direct. The journey and all its commotion has dampened her social abilities.

If Gus is upset, there’s no telling: rigidity seems her default setting.

“You work for Athena Enterprises,” says Jasyn, nodding to the insignia on her overalls pocket. Twisting the stem of her wine glass, Gus nods. “And what do you do there?”

“We manufacture vehicles for various purposes,” says Gus, with the calculated precision of a monarch’s advisor.

Questions jostle Jasyn’s mind. Frustration buzzes under her skin. The memory of the AE trucks crushing their way through the village. The reverberation of familiar voices screaming. Blood in the snow. It all steals her breath.

“Our village was ripped apart. Our friends and family slaughtered and stolen. Some of those vehicles were bound for Athena Enterprises. Why? *What goes on behind those doors?*”

A web of ice forms so suddenly within her gripped glass, the vessel cracks and berry-wine stains the table. Ice branches across the surface, as if it, too, were reaching for answers.

Across the room, the boy gasps. The girl has enough smarts about her to distract him with the entertainment of the ice-screen.

Atalanta places her hand on Jasyn’s, taking the sharpness from the crystalline formations. Gus dabs her mouth with her

napkin. Her silence suggests she's either gathering her thoughts or ignoring Jasyn's outburst entirely. Jasyn cringes. The Ice Queen who couldn't control her ice – is that who Gus sees in her?

"Time for bed, my darlings," says Idmon, getting up and leading the children away. "Come on, my unique little snowflakes," he adds, picking up the boy. Only once the children's bedroom door is closed does the conversation resume.

"I bet it's difficult to start a revolution when you're comfortable," says Jasyn, eliciting a biting glare from Gus.

The statement hangs there, crystallising in their minds, until Gus's frown morphs into vague laughter.

Jasyn and Atalanta exchange a look. Peleus looks up from his plate. *What's funny?*

Gus' laughter dies.

"I admire your determination, and hail knows this world could do with changing for the better. And please know I mean no disrespect," she says to Jasyn. "But I've known you no time at all and it's clear as Corinth is green that you know so little of your abilities, or those of the strange relic that you've misplaced. I fear all you're destined to prove is how dangerous just a little knowledge can be."

Jasyn scowls. Insults are always worse when accurate.

"Why you lack the crucial pieces of the puzzle of who you are, I can guess. You've had to hide your entire life. It's kept you alive, but it hasn't made you of much use in usurping a powerful self-proclaimed monarch."

It annoys Jasyn that she can find no fault in Gus' reasoning.

"In my experience," says Gus, more gently, "if something isn't working, you study its components, how it all fits together. Only then can you disassemble it and piece it back together."

Atalanta nods at the metaphor she can get on board with.

“You rip out the steering without a thought to what happens next, you’re liable to crash and burn in liquid ice.”

Jasyn shrinks into her chair. This must be what a tiny moon in the shadow of a planet feels like.

“Why has he not been overthrown?” says Gus. “The Ice King is a one-man army. If you stand up to him, you’ll end up dead, or worse. You fight ice with ice, we all may end up frozen.”

Finishing her wine, she stands.

Jasyn, Atalanta, Tiphys and Peleus all stare up at her.

“You are here in my home because otherwise Iolcus would rip you apart. You want me to answer all the questions under the Seven Suns? Questions that could get us all killed? You want me to take responsibility for the impossible situations the Ice King has brought upon us? I knew your mother. It is for her I have taken the risk of sheltering you. But I do not know you. I do not owe you answers.”

Gus dabs her mouth with her napkin.

“Idmon will show you to your rooms. Tomorrow, I will do what I can to help you find what you’re looking for. If you’ll excuse me, I have work to do.”

And with that, she leaves her guests to ruminate. Apart, apparently, from Peleus. All he wants to know is:

“Are you not eating that?”

THE SKELETON KEY

With the children sleeping, Idmon in the kitchen dealing with the mountain of used crockery (“Don’t be ridiculous, you’re guests,” he’d said when Jasyn and Atalanta offered to help), and Gus hidden away working on whatever an Athena engineer works on late into the night, their guests are left to their own devices.

Above the clouds, the skies are still and Jasyn could almost be convinced there’s no storm churning the city streets, no facility imprisoning the cargo of dead or dying. No murderous Ice King on a stolen throne.

It’s not right, basking in the warmth of a therma-place, sipping sweet tea, when people she cares about are out there, their lives forfeit.

We’ll be risking our lives for ghosts. Atalanta’s words reverberate in Jasyn’s thoughts. But they don’t know that for sure. Even if there’s one person still alive, isn’t it worth the risk? Gus has promised to try to help, but what if she can’t? What if she takes too long? What if she changes her mind?

Time is ticking and Jasyn is unwilling to let the fate of the stolen be decided while she does nothing. The best thing she can do right now is channel her frustration into a plan.

“Just think, this time tomorrow Iolcus will be a changed world.” Peleus offers a grin over his own steaming cup of tea, snapping Jasyn out of her ruminations. It’s not clear whether he’s being sarcastic, or what exactly he means.

Jasyn looks to Atalanta for a clue.

“What are you talking about?” Atalanta signs and Jasyn repeats.

“The Games. Like we talked about. By this time tomorrow, you’ll have unleashed your ice-abilities and put the Ice King in his place. You’ll be sitting on a throne, watching over your kingdom...” Peleus pauses, deciphering something. “Queendom? Or is it still kingdom? Oddly gender-specific, isn’t it? Anyway. The important thing is you’ll be ruling over Iolcus and rewarding those who stood by you with—”

“What planet are you living on?” signs Atalanta.

Jasyn places her tea down. Thanks to her disquiet, it’s cooled anyway. “I’m not sure what conversation you think we had, Peleus. And I think you’re overestimating my abilities, and my ambitions.”

As if trying on silence for size, Tiphys watches them all from behind his own steaming teacup. He might be kicking himself for sharing too much lately. Perhaps in an effort to be quiet a moment longer, he gulps his tea, scowling. *Too hot.*

“You want to make Iolcus a better place, don’t you?” Peleus’ words are a statement more than a question. “One where people don’t get murdered, and villages aren’t torn to the ground?”

Rhetorical, surely?

Death and destruction rips into Jasyn’s thoughts. Gripping her teacup all the tighter, she can only observe the liquid’s surface crackling from cool to crystalline, turning the sweet treat to a drink of daggers.

“Yeah, I can tell you’re a bit of a do-gooder like that,” says Peleus.

Jasyn wishes she knew when he was being sarcastic.

“I won’t be going anywhere near the Ice King tomorrow,” she says.

Atalanta attempts to hide her relief behind a sip of tea. Blowing on his steaming drink, Tiphys looks between Peleus and Jasyn.

“Gus is right,” says Jasyn. “It would be suicide. I’m not useful to anyone or any cause if I’m dead.”

Deflated, Peleus grumbles into his cup as if the tea has personally offended him.

“For now, our priority has to be finding any survivors. And fast.” The engine of Jasyn’s mind steams ahead. “Those hatches beyond the city square, they lead to something. Whatever that building is, someone has a way in.”

If Gus doesn’t make good on her promise, finding out could take days – or weeks. It won’t be helped by having to stay under the radar. They don’t have that kind of time.

The spark of an idea ignites, but it takes some hunting through the tunnels of her mind to find its source. In the Dead Woods, she’d borrowed Peleus’ Trading-Shard. She’d watched snippets of the Gladiator Princess swiping and manoeuvring with her ice-sword, snippets of her in embroidered royal garments rather than armour. Intrigued by her, *hating her*, Jasyn had watched those images over and over, studying her expressions and wondering what level of darkness lay beyond those frost-filled eyes.

The odd detail of the white-quartz skull pendant about her neck blazes bright in Jasyn’s thoughts. And hadn’t Tiphys said something about royalty roaming the city freely? Something about a key? She’s surprised the chatter had stuck.

She’s not sure when she started pacing, her palms pressed together beneath her chin. Atalanta, Peleus and Tiphys are all staring at her, expectant.

“What’s your problem?” asks Peleus.

“Can I look at your Trading-Shard?”

He hands it over as though she’d asked for a kidney.

Jasyn swipes through images of impressive gladiators of varying builds, weapons and colour schemes, until she reaches the one she’s looking for. The armoured athlete, the glower of steely determination, the Gladiator Princess.

“Tiphys, you said something about royals having a key to the city?”

“You were listening?” says Tiphys, his eyes lighting up. “Erm. Yes. Compatible with all Iolcian keypads, apparently.”

Jasyn reverse-pinches the screen to home in on the misshapen oval pendant. The circuitry within glistens in the formation of a key.

Atalanta smirks.

Peleus stares at the image, scratching his head.

“Oh,” says Tiphys. “It’s a—”

“—skeleton key,” interrupts Peleus, unwilling to be outsmarted by him. But Tiphys definitely wins with the eyeroll that follows.

“That sounds about the shape of what we need right now,” says Jasyn.

“I hate to point out that it’s beyond our reach...” signs Atalanta.

The spark in Jasyn’s thoughts has become a star. Other stars pulse into existence, but there’s no order. She needs to connect them, to create the constellation of their plan, blazing bright and leading their path.

“Tiphys, you said you could get us into The Games?”

“Only citizens can get through the gates,” Peleus objects.

“Now that we’re in the city, I know a way to Permit you, at least temporarily.” Tiphys aims his words at Jasyn and Atalanta, ignoring Peleus. “I’ll make sure you can walk through the stadium gates.”

“If I can fight against the Ice Princess in the arena... If I can get that key...” Jasyn thinks aloud.

“And then what?” signs Atalanta, apprehension scrawled across her features. She rises, as if she’s about to dart into the wilderness. But there’s nowhere for her to run.

She paces, instead.

“I throw the fight and get out. It’s just theatrical bloodshed, right? I mean, people don’t actually die, do they?” Jasyn addresses Tiphys, but Peleus answers.

“Fact and fiction can be difficult to discern.” He shrugs. “All I know is there are gladiators who are no longer in the line-up. But, still, you can’t just *be* a gladiator. They’re known quantities with thousands of followers. You can’t just *turn up*.”

“Tiphys, you said your dad made sure you were able to take part in The Games?” asks Jasyn and Tiphys’ smile suggests he’s thrilled she really was listening.

He opens his mouth to speak but Peleus talks over him. “There’s a portion of The Games given over to civilians. At halftime, the selection spins. One person from the audience is selected to fight whichever gladiator is winning. Invariably, it’s the Princess. Once she’s in the arena, she’s there for the duration. Every battle she enters, she wins. No one wants to win against her, for some reason.” Peleus takes a breath, having, in his enthusiasm, forgotten to breathe. “I knew being a fan boy would pay off one day,” he says, with a grin.

“Audience participation?” signs Atalanta, her nose crinkled as if the concept has a bad smell. “Think this through, Jasyn. You can’t be a contender. You might be recognised.”

A star in her building constellation dims. Jasyn slicks back her unruly dull blond hair, sensing the possibilities but seeing the gaps.

“What was that?” asks Peleus, doing a vague impression of Atalanta but making no sense before interrupting any possible translation with: “I’ll do it. I volunteer.” He says it with more than a hint of grand, self-aware heroism. “I have a Permit, so it won’t show any red flags.”

“And we’re going to rely on, what? Luck?” signs Atalanta and Jasyn repeats.

“You don’t need luck. You have me,” says Tiphys, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. “My father knew some of the gladiators. And so do I.”

“You do?” The glint in Peleus’ eye is torn between hate and hero worship.

“I know how to rig it,” says Tiphys. “But I’ll be the one to go into the arena.”

“Wait,” says Peleus. “No. Me. I’m going in.”

“I hate to hail on your parade...” begins Tiphys, “well, I don’t hate it that much... but the one to go into the arena should be the one with the skill of stealth.”

As Peleus’ enthusiasm turns to annoyance, with a single stride towards Tiphys, he trips on a chair leg. Atalanta steps in to simultaneously catch him and hold him back.

“I mean, you’re making my point for me.” Tiphys smiles. “I doubt you’ll be able to swipe the key, even without a thousand Iolcian eyes watching.”

Peleus folds his arms and sits.

Jasyn does not like this plan one bit. It was different when she was putting herself in the line of fire.

“It’s dangerous,” she says, picking up Tiphys’ discarded cup full of piping hot tea.

“No kidding,” Peleus interrupts. “You’ll be in the ring with the Princess Killer.”

“Then why were *you* so keen to share her arena?” says Tiphys.

Peleus scowls.

“Stealing from the princess,” continues Jasyn, purposefully cooling the cup with her touch. Tiphys’s eyes widen: *Cool*. “If you’re caught...”

“I won’t be.” Tiphys takes a sip, nodding approval at the result. “I’ll get you in. And I’ll get you that key.”

ELECTRIC SKIES

J asyn has never showered quite like this. Heated pipes deliver the water from all directions, enticing out the grime that village ice-water had never shifted.

As her body tingles with warmth, she watches the discoloured water drain away. The heated water sears through her shoulder, opening the barely healing wound. Her upper arm and torn ear, too. The red spiral of plug water has her thoughts taking a similar pattern.

Villagers' screams. Father's distress. Snowdrop's cries. All taunt her mind's ear. The soldiers' faces in their dying shudders twist her gut. She will never see their village again, at least not as they once knew it. The ache of loss claws her insides.

How she wishes her ripped feelings would drain away, too.

It isn't guilt that's melted the dead soldiers' faces into her mind, but a mix of horror and regret. *This didn't have to happen.* But if she had to choose again whether to end their lives and try to save her family, she'd do the same a thousand times.

She splashes her face, failing to wash away the anxiety of her unyielding thoughts. She stretches her left shoulder, a pulsing, scorching reminder of the ice-spike and all that has happened. The burn tells of damage and healing, with no clarity on where one ends and the other begins. Her fall from Algid has left a fresh dapple of bruises across her side. Under the heat, her muscles unknot, but her bruises take on new

throbbing depths that serve only to parallel the pains in her mind.

Stepping out of the shower, Jasyn attempts to pat her body dry with a towel that's softer than any she's used before. But she can only stand there, exhausted. Opting instead to use the air-blast, she dries and manages to get into her warmed vest and shorts. *It shouldn't be this difficult, should it?*

As if able to sense her struggle, or – more likely – having heard it, Atalanta arrives in the doorway. Already showered and in her steam-pressed, albeit still vaguely bloodstained under-clothes, she brandishes clean bandages and an expression that says “I'm here to help and you're not going to stop me.”

It would appear Gus is high enough in the Iolcian pecking order to be rewarded with the luxury of a spare room. Peleus had been offered the sofa, which he'd fallen asleep on while watching The Games re-runs. Tiphys has insisted on sleeping on a collection of narrow cushions under the dining table because, he said, “confined to a bunk is how astronauts sleep.” All of which means Jasyn and Atalanta have the privilege of this room, warmer than any cave or den or ice-brick cottage.

Heated pipes criss-cross the walls and ceiling like rigid linear roots and branches, a far cry from the organic shaping and glow of Atalanta's woodland den.

Despite the veil of safety and warmth, Jasyn's thoughts remain unsettled.

Time alone with Atalanta is the fresh air she needs. Her lungs open and her breathing calms. Atalanta pats the bed, instructing her to sit. Jasyn perches, angling to allow Atalanta to inspect her injuries, with a touch so gentle she could cry. She applies a soothing balm to the stripe across Jasyn's upper arm where the ice-pellet bullet skimmed her skin, to her shoulder and, finally, her ear.

That last touch has Jasyn inviting Atalanta's palm to her cheek, but Atalanta clears her throat, retreating.

“It’s too hot in here,” Atalanta signs. “I’ll need another ice-shower to cool down.”

Jasyn scowls. Is it the heat, or her, making Atalanta uncomfortable?

Atalanta threads clean bandages beneath Jasyn’s vest, around her chest and shoulder, cutting the material’s end with an arrowhead. The bandage pressure numbs the pain to a dull throb.

Jasyn lifts aside Atalanta’s red-stained vest strap and inspects the wound mirrored on both sides of her right shoulder. With a gentle tug of material, she questions whether it can be removed. Staring at their reflections in the massive window, Atalanta nods and, with Jasyn’s help, lifts it over her head, careful not to over-stretch.

If the circumstances were different, seeing Atalanta half-naked in the dual-moonlight would be welcome. As it is, the masked pain contorting her face, her body damaged by her efforts to keep Jasyn safe, encourages Jasyn only to sadness.

As gently as she’s able, Jasyn applies the balm and winds clean gauze over the deep puncture across Atalanta’s shoulder and around her torso. At Atalanta’s stifled gasps, Jasyn does everything she can not to wrap her in her arms and pull her close, for to do so would only cause further pain.

All the while, Atalanta keeps her gaze trained on anything that isn’t Jasyn.

Once the bandage is in place, Jasyn lowers Atalanta’s vest onto her. She leans forward to try to catch Atalanta’s line of sight, but Atalanta springs up and strides to the wall, sliding the switch and turning the lights out.

The floor-to-ceiling windows frame unsettled meteorological swirls. Protected from the elements by thick glass, the bedroom looks out over a sea of clouds and the spires of the city. Is this what cocooned creatures feel like? *Is this what the privileged protect?*

But Jasyn is more interested in Atalanta’s inner landscape.

The moonlight is enough to highlight the disquiet in her features. She stares at the double bed as if it were the strangest of inventions.

“Therma-stone for your thoughts?” signs Jasyn, reaching for her.

Atalanta flinches, but her features immediately buckle with apology.

“Why are you retreating from me?” signs Jasyn.

A flash of something enters Atalanta’s eyes. Vulnerability? Upset? She channels whatever it is into claiming a plump pillow and punching it into submission.

She doesn’t want to be here.

Tears needle the backs of Jasyn’s eyes. *Hail*. Grief, stress and exhaustion have done a number on her.

“If you don’t want to be here, you don’t have to be,” signs Jasyn, as evenly as she’s able as lightning bristles the sky.

“Of course I don’t want to be here.” Atalanta throws her words at Jasyn, grimacing and regretting her shoulder movement immediately.

“Then go.” The signed gesture lashes through Jasyn’s chest.

A fork of electricity lashes at the stars. Regret slices through her. She hadn’t meant to be so severe. The moment hangs between them, raw as an open wound.

A constellation of crimson seeps through Atalanta’s bandage. Jasyn reaches out to offer assistance, but Atalanta keeps her distance.

“You would discard me, just like that?” signs Atalanta. “I don’t want to be here, Jasyn. More than anything, I want us to be a thousand miles away—”

Tremors of electricity in the sky reflect in the galaxies of her eyes.

“I don’t blame you,” signs Jasyn, turning to hide her tears as she swipes at them.

Atalanta steps in front of her, forcing her to see her words. “What?”

Of course rain is falling now. *Hail*, she hates that her feelings are painted in the sky. Especially when it’s so unsubtle.

“I don’t blame you. Your every wound is because of me.”

Lightning dances across the sea of clouds, skittering between the tallest buildings, the sharp towered ice-palace among them. The charged atmosphere sparks the sky, as though it and they are dancing an awkward tango.

“I want you to go,” Jasyn continues. “I’m afraid you will. I’m afraid you won’t. I’m afraid I’ll get you hurt. I’m afraid you’ll fear me. I’m afraid...”

She forgets to breathe as Atalanta pushes her against the window with a kiss so electric that lightning strikes, dancing across the glass like a plasma globe.

“I’m not afraid of you, idiot,” signs Atalanta, affection in her eyes. “You’re not hearing me. *I don’t want to be here*. I want this horrid world to go away. I want to be in the Glowing Woods, or up in the mountains, or anywhere else. But my home isn’t any of those places. My home is with you. I’m *afraid* because I could lose you.”

Relief washes over Jasyn with the power of a soothing balm.

As if overwhelmed by her own actions, or afraid her feelings won’t be reciprocated, Atalanta steps back, every muscle coiled as if she might run. Before she loses her, Jasyn reaches for her vest, drawing her gently to her.

“I don’t want to be the cause of your pain,” whispers Jasyn.

“Then stop being an idiot,” signs Atalanta with a wry smile, pressing closer.

Static electricity teases the air.

“You ask the impossible...” signs Jasyn with a lopsided grin, half a moment before her lips gravitate to Atalanta’s

neck, the salt and sweetness of her skin. When Atalanta gasps, Jasyn feels it as her own. *This must be what zero gravity feels like...* Her body weightless, her senses soaring.

Atalanta guides Jasyn's mouth back to hers, and it's not long before their heated kisses turn feverish. The atmosphere charged, cocooned from the elements, warm hands venture under minimal layers, seeking connection. Their mouths occupied, Jasyn guides Atalanta by the hips until her back plants against the windowpane.

How Jasyn wishes she could heal every bruise and blemish the last few days – that *life* – has brought them. An impossible task, but one she channels with each soft press of lips to skin. If she can't reverse the pain, the least she can do is bring pleasure in its place.

Her mouth makes the downward journey as any explorer's might, from neck to sternum, to chest falling and rising with quickened breaths, down to stomach muscles adjusting under her touch.

Eyes closed, Atalanta runs her fingers through the gentle waves of Jasyn's unbound hair and the soft bristles cropped beneath, before seeking her uninjured shoulder and tracing the definition of muscles, cultivated through many sun-orbits of climbing. Her clear appreciation makes Jasyn smile against her skin.

Kneeling before her, Jasyn gazes up at the silhouette against the stars. Atalanta's eyes open, meeting hers.

Electric.

The synaptic sky ripples and Atalanta answers the question in Jasyn's eyes with a fervent nod. Fingertips press to skin as Jasyn slips down the fabric barrier between them.

Electricity teases the air.

As they melt into each other, hands rake through Jasyn's hair, guiding her. As mouth and tongue and fingers explore, body and room temperature rises. Pleasure dulls pain. Muscles and weather-fronts discover release. Windows steam. The skies swirl and sway.

Thunder rolls.

And only two people under the Iolcian sky know why.

AN UNINVITED DREAM

Z
Z Z

Three moons rule the sky. If that isn't enough of a clue that you are far from home, you note the constellations are different from the ones you've spent your life beneath.

Lush and alive, a mesh of twisted vines creep for freedom up a sharp-edged stone wall. Blood-red blossom weaves between the bars of the locked, ornate wrought iron.

A prison or a sanctuary?

Should you be fascinated or afraid as petals unfurl, as leaves reach out, and vines slither themselves into knots? You look up past the tunnel of walls around you.

At the snap of a twig, you turn.

A figure steps out. So dark are her flowing gowns she would be one with the shadows if it weren't for her face and arms awash with three-directional moonlight. Her untethered, drifting shadow-hair glistens. Amethyst eyes sparkle. You know her as the apparition in the ice-labyrinth, the woman who led you and your friends to safety. A smile haunts her lips, inviting you to follow as she retreats into the garden-maze.

You lift aside the coiling foliage to pursue.

At a gap in the garden canopy, the mysterious woman gazes at the heavens. A dreamer's smile ignites as the night twinkles in her eyes. She speaks. Her voice is smooth, lyrical and sweet, but not of your tongue. Only when a dreamy echo returns to you do you understand her words:

“You have a long way to go...”

“Who are you?” you ask. “Where are you? Where are we?”

The mysterious woman’s eyes level with yours. Her smile teases you as her melodious voice intoxicates. Draped in a thin dark material, flowing against her contours, her shape is not left to your imagination. You avert your gaze, but she reaches out, inviting you to look.

Your heart races with excitement or fear. You’re not sure which. Heat envelops you, stealing your breath and sending your vision into a spin. Lines blur. The world threatens to collapse to shadows. Between gasps, you repeat, “Who are you?” but you forget your other questions as the treacle of her aroma serpents around you. You close your eyes, and a warmth meets your lips.

You open your eyes and retreat.

The honey of her kiss tingles your lips, but only a flutter of shadow lingers in her place. The words of her language stroke your ears. The grasping vines lash about your wrists, so tight your pulse rebels. On the stifling warmth of the breeze, her voice returns:

“Welcome to my world, Jasyn of Iolcus. My name is Medea.”



Jasyn wakes to the distant clatter of hail beneath the clouds, crashing – she imagines – like water against a cliff.

Blinking away the lingering images of the odd and uninvited dream, she’s alone in the bed. She bolts upright and scans the shadows – the throb of her shoulder protesting the sudden movement – only to discover Atalanta looking up at her from the floor. Her quizzical expression asks *what in the world is wrong?*

“What are you doing down there?” signs Jasyn, her movements captured by moonlight.

Her Transonics set to a low glow, the glimmer in Atalanta's eyes suggests she's been awake a while. The barely audible regular clicking could be a leaking pipe somewhere in the room, or Atalanta's thoughts ticking over.

"The bed is too soft. The covers too warm," signs Atalanta, opening out the cape she's lying on – Jasyn's burgundy and purple cape – in invitation.

Like Jasyn, she wears only her bandages, a fact which has Jasyn's breath catching before she lowers and wriggles into position beside her. She tries not to focus too much on the heat of Atalanta's skin against her own.

"You had a bad dream?" signs Atalanta.

A pang of guilt prickles Jasyn's chest for having a dream so wholly unrelated to her inner landscape, a dream that made no sense.

"It was nothing," she signs, gesturing it away and looking past Atalanta to the majestic vista of stars.

Atalanta's nod is slow, thoughtful. "We have to be better," she signs. "We've spent so long at arm's length and confused because we failed to communicate. I know I can be..."

Jasyn raises an eyebrow, intrigued.

"...skittish," continues Atalanta with a timid but knowing smile. "It's something I'm working on."

"Does this mean you'll be less evasive when I ask questions?" Jasyn offers a smile of mischief, hoping to put her at ease.

"Absolutely not. How else am I meant to maintain my allure and mystery?"

"Allure and mystery? Is that what that is?"

"And omniscience. So, best you don't question it."

Jasyn's heart trills at the playful sparkle in Atalanta's eyes. That Atalanta seeks out her toes with her own, a gesture so natural it feels like they've done it a thousand times before, makes her want to sing.

She doesn't, because that would be weird.

"Anyway," Atalanta shrugs, pushing the stray hair behind Jasyn's ear. "Maybe you shouldn't tell me. Everyone knows other people's dreams are deathly boring." At her exaggerated eye-roll, Jasyn can't help but smile.

Atalanta is right. They have to be better.

"It was strange," signs Jasyn. "The dream. I was surrounded by plants greener than I've ever seen. Growing, as if it was the most natural thing... They grew so fast they seemed almost... sentient. The sky was different, too. Unfamiliar constellations. It all felt so real."

She pauses to stretch her hands and take a breath.

"The woman I saw in the tunnels of ice, the one who showed me, showed us, the way out... She was there. She kissed me. In the dream, I mean."

The twinkle in Atalanta's eyes is punctuated by a raised eyebrow. "Should I be jealous?"

"No," Jasyn signs. "The kiss. It was... uninvited."

Atalanta rolls onto her good shoulder, to observe Jasyn more closely.

"She unsettles you?"

"Apparitions that guide me through unfamiliar terrain and dreams that feel real unsettle me. I just... my dreams are usually more like memories, as if my mind is searching through what's already there. But this... is new. Maybe Peleus is right. The cold got its teeth into me."

"In this furnace?" Atalanta nods to their surroundings as she traces Jasyn's temple with her fingertips.

The gentle touch calms her, until the background clicks of pipes or a timepiece tap at her thoughts.

"What if it's already too late?" she whispers. "What if they're already gone? What if we can't save them? It's a lot to risk for those who are already lost."

Atalanta nods, not rushing to answer.

“We could leave. Make our lives somewhere far from the Ice City.” The auroras in Atalanta’s eyes let Jasyn know she has more to say. “But, in time, we’ll wonder – could we have done something? Could we have saved lives? Regret will creep in, cracking us from within.” *Like an ice-pane, or the fractured icefields...* “If we leave without trying, we risk everything, because we risk losing ourselves and each other.”

Atalanta catches Jasyn’s fingers within the mesh of her own.

“When the world is out of shape,” she continues, “someone has to chip away and sculpt it. To make it right. Or, at least, try.”

Jasyn can’t help but draw her into a kiss. The world might be backward and upside-down and inside-out, but at least they can brave this storm together. That Atalanta is kissing her, that being close in this way is now a possibility, that Atalanta is precisely who she is, fills Jasyn with happiness, gratitude and more.

“Thank you,” signs Jasyn.

“For what?”

“Everything.”

“Oh. Just... everything?”

Jasyn nods, smiling.

“Thank *you*,” signs Atalanta.

“For what?”

“Cooling me down.” She wiggles her toes against Jasyn’s.

In a manoeuvre that she wishes were smoother, but is hindered by the practicalities of a shoulder injury, Jasyn nuzzles into Atalanta’s neck as she rolls above her, planting elbows either side of her head.

With a knowing and mischievous smile, Atalanta raises her knees, so their stance is exactly how it had been in the blanket box. Only this time, there are no concerns about hypothermia, frostbite and gateway guardians, and – as Atalanta’s hand

ventures between them – this time, all they need to focus on is their ability to communicate without words.

THE GAMES

Triangles of blue, silver and black flutter, as excited supporters wave their flags. The keenest brandish stylised weapons that Jasyn can only guess mimic the gladiators' own selection. Tridents, spears, clubs, as well as the occasional Iolcian ice-sword knock-off. Iolcus might be low on resources, but cheap merchandise is apparently at the top of the priority list.

That morning, with Gus already out at work, Idmon had been convinced – over the course of a long and mostly reasonable conversation – that not letting his house guests out of the sky-rise to experience the city's culture, is the sort of thing a tyrant would do. Not a house husband who believes in the greater good.

In the end, he insisted he save them the long walk to the arena. ("The longer the journey, the more possibilities for trouble.") He had driven them in a significantly more functional vehicle than the wagon, to a darkened alley not overlooked by citizens or surveillance, but within reach of their destination.

Which is how, with relative ease and a scolding reminder for Jasyn to keep her face hidden, they now find themselves as tightly packed as berries in a bucket, in the crowds churning their way towards the almighty entrance to The Games stadium.

She can only hope Gus will understand.

Ice-walls loop the moving images of impressive gladiator contenders – some svelte, built for speed, others muscular, for brute force, some with armour, others intent on showing off their *assets*. The virtual parade is punctuated by the question:

WHO WILL SURVIVE?

Having not spent much time watching this bizarre blood sport, other than recently to revel in her building hatred of the Gladiator Princess, Jasyn doesn't know whether the question is hyperbole. She hopes so, but in this strange city of thieves and hungry hordes, it wouldn't take much to convince her otherwise.

At least the audience participation segment is only for *fun*.

Swimming against the current is nigh on impossible. Try as she might to stay alongside Atalanta, Tiphys and Peleus, and to dodge people without showing her face, the crowd insists on jostling her further.

A few solidly built Iolcians barge between them. Within seconds Atalanta is swept aside. Jasyn tries to keep her within sight, but the teeming crowd has other ideas.

The locals don't hold back from staring at Tiphys. Some even disregard his personal space by pinching his cheeks.

Jasyn had been through similar experiences in her early teens, but that was in a sparsely populated village, not an overcrowded city. As the nudging to reach Tiphys intensifies, she worries for his safety. She'd thought facing the Gladiator Princess in the arena would be the danger to worry about, not the queue to get there.

It makes sense that in a world with few children, a young teenager would draw stares. That doesn't make it welcome, or less creepy, nor less useful in their need to keep under the radar.

Tiphys forces a smile and carries on.

The crowds shove. A few jostles too many and Tiphys is swept from her sight.

Up ahead, an ear-jarring *whir-whoop* demands attention. The stadium gateway is awash with red light and alarms blaze. A crack in the air, a gunshot, follows. There are gasps, but no one screams. The crowd doesn't slow. This sort of thing must be normal here.

Through the crowds, Jasyn glimpses guards dragging a body away.

Heavens above. Where are Atalanta and Tiphys?

On account of Peleus being Permitted, she's not worried about him. He's probably having the time of his life.

Jasyn elbows to the edge of the gangway to gain a better view of the guards and their catch. The shape of the dragged body is unfamiliar.

Relief.

Though a person punctured through the chest with a jagged ice-bullet is hardly a calming sight. That the body is heaved atop a writhing pile of carcasses, not entirely dead, adds a further layer of loathing for the ways of this place, and fear for what lies ahead.

Peleus' idea of a fun day out is fast becoming a horror show.

In the alley where Idmon had left them, Jasyn had asked Tiphys about the Permits. He'd told her "not to worry" and led the way into more crowded streets. Not wanting to ask about *illegal Permits* in the presence of potentially unfriendly listening ears, Jasyn hadn't been able to press the subject. She'd thought she'd have more time. She hadn't considered how swift the current of the crowds would be.

A warning blazes across the ice-walls, declaring: UNPERMITTED: PENALTY DEATH. Other signs clarify that CITIZENS ONLY are welcome here. As if the friendliness and charm of Iolcus City were in doubt.

A lump rises in Jasyn's throat. Panic propels her heartbeats as she tries to wade upstream, but when she turns to the impending gateway, she's no further from it.

Lines of light scan each citizen as they step over the detector line, triggering their Permit details, and a mugshot projected on a high up ice-screen for sniper-guards to inspect. Each Permitted citizen is accompanied by a blue light and a *blip*. This may not be of any help to Jasyn, as having a deeper understanding of one's cause of death does not necessarily do anything to prevent it.

The wall of crowd presses her closer to the deadly threshold.

An ice-sculpted royal crest glowers over her from above the stadium gateway. The up-high sniper-guards survey the crowds and Jasyn can do nothing but keep her hood up and close her eyes as she's shunted over the line.

Every muscle clenched, she awaits the alarm.

Her forward momentum refuses to cease, carried by the herd. When no alarm or bullet strikes, she opens her eyes.

The inside of the stadium fans out, allowing Jasyn to escape the incessant flow. She takes her opportunity. Though the question of *How did I get through?* is lodged in her mind, her friends' safety demands priority.

Her Transonics are inert, drawing no attention, but the familiar shape of Atalanta's arrows in their quiver draws Jasyn's focus as Atalanta struts over the detector line.

Jasyn's breathing grinds to a halt.

If the alarms blare, she'll create some kind of diversion to draw the snipers.

The scanning produces the ID image on the scrolling ice-screen of someone who doesn't at all resemble Atalanta. It remains in place for a mere blink of an eye before it's replaced by the next civilian.

With the quantity of people crossing the lines, the sniper-guards must depend on the alarms rather than their ability to match faces to images. Jasyn has never been so relieved by someone else's incompetence.

The question of *Where is Tiphys?* is answered when she spies him at Atalanta's side, a grin on his face and a hint of blush in his cheeks.

Embers of fear still burn her nerves. As Tiphys leads the way, Jasyn shuffles through the crowd to join them. Though pleased they've made it in one piece, she's frazzled from the lack of warning about what would happen.

"You could have told me..." Jasyn is aware of other ears around them. She leaves the rest of her sentence – *that we had Permits already* – unsaid.

"I told you not to worry," says Tiphys. "Besides" – he puffs out his chest, angling a little towards Atalanta – "a magician doesn't reveal their secrets."

Unfortunately for Tiphys, Atalanta's focus is on the arena and stadium.

"Where's Peleus?" she signs.

Jasyn scans the crowds, but this place must hold thousands in its tiered seating. The opposite side of the stadium is too distant to discern faces and details. Its walls are high enough to block out all but the tips of surrounding sky-rises, which combine with the stadium edge to frame the always grumbling sky.

"Wherever he is, I'm sure he's blissfully happy," says Jasyn.

Tiphys leads them to a lower-tier box, overlooking the stalls and the metal mesh separating arena from crowd. They take their seats, thankfully free from the crush below. At least up here they're less likely to have uncouth city folk harassing Tiphys and Jasyn can worry less about being seen.

Tiphys plants himself between Jasyn and Atalanta. *Is this kid serious?* It hasn't escaped Jasyn's notice that he's enamoured with Atalanta. But does he have to be so blatant about it? Not that Atalanta seems to have noticed. And Jasyn is hardly one to talk. Her own crush on Atalanta could probably have been seen from the next galaxy over. No doubt it still can.

There's something damp in her inner sleeve. *What the hell is that?* A luminous line is latched onto her sleeve, like the dangling snare of a bloody glow worm. This must be the Permit.

Urgh.

"I'd leave that if I were you," says Tiphys.

"Are these from—" Jasyn lowers her voice. "Other people?" She fails to disguise her disgust.

"Relax. Nobody died." Tiphys glances about the stadium, thrilled to be here and beside Atalanta. "Well, they did. But that was nothing to do with me. I liberated the 'items' before the bodies were cleared."

"We're walking around with dead-people Permits?"

"I'm not an idiot." Tiphys rolls his eyes. "It takes days for sanitation soldiers to update the records after a death. I think what you're trying to say is 'Thank you'."

Jasyn grumbles.

Adjusting her hood, she people-watches. The attendees' focus is half on finding a seat and half on swarming heavily guarded cabins. The people reaching the front of the chaotic queues each have their Permit hand scanned, before being given a pink-grey slab of *something*. Jasyn glimpses a nearby citizen squelching their teeth into one. It's not like any food she's seen before. Nor like any she wants to see, either.

Tiphys must follow her eye-line. "They distribute rations here."

"People don't just come here to be entertained? They come here to be fed?" No wonder they were so keen to get in, even if the culinary offerings are unappetising.

Atalanta's eyes scan every which way, her posture rigid. In a strange place, without her Transonics open and on. Understandably, she's on edge.

Jasyn considers reaching past Tiphys and squeezing her hand, but the possibility is trampled by the sudden booming announcement: "WELCOME TO THE GAMES." Its volume

is augmented by the loudhailer funnels snaking from the booth at the edge of the arena all across the stadium.

“That’s the Games Master’s booth.” Tiphys points as the crowds whoop and stomp and war drums thrum an insistent rhythm.

Looming above the arena, a vast ice-screen captures the over-excited crowd in close-up. One of whom is Peleus, taking a massive mouthful of a pink-grey slab, dribbling it down his face. He chokes mildly with excitement as he realises he’s on screen.

Jasyn taps Atalanta’s shoulder to point out the hilarious image, and a smile relaxes her features.

Citizens laugh and cheer. For them, this must be a much-needed day out. What would it feel like to be a part of this? To be two normal Iolcians, here to be entertained?

But how many of these people were within the mob that chased them? That question thuds her back to reality.

The ice-screen moves on to the all-important question WHO WILL SURVIVE?

“And now, for our first contenders...” booms the Games Master’s voice.

The audience stamp their feet and the stadium lights go out and a spotlight brighter than wagon headlamps sweeps the edge of the arena. Around and around, lingering over cross-hatched cage bars with arms and weapons piercing through. The light-roulette’s journey begins to slow.

“Captain of the Skies...” the voice booms, and the stomping grows louder in approval. “Killer of Monsters... Hero of the arena...”

Metal grinds against metal as cage doors crank upwards. A club-wielding woman bursts from her raised portcullis and into the silver sands of the arena.

The blazing ice-screen labels her: HERAKLES as the announcer over-enunciates her name, “Heraaaa-kleeeeez.” The audience’s enthusiasm suggests she really is the hero of the

arena. Their fervour feels infectious. “Herakles, Herakles, Herakles,” calls the crowd with such reverberation in time with the drums, that it buzzes in Jasyn’s chest.

The gladiator’s hair – shaved close at the sides with the diagonals of her captain stripes, and sculpted curls on top – would be eye-catching even without its mix of purple and neon-blue mirroring the splash of war paint across her cheeks. Her broad shoulders and arms bulge out of her vest-armour as she brandishes her club. A swaggering, sculpted presence. The arena’s ice-screen displays her in real-time close-up, capturing the self-assured glint in her eyes.

Jasyn raises an eyebrow. Okay... Maybe she can see the appeal of arena theatrics.

“To battle against...”

The roulette spotlight swoops the perimeter. The audience *whoop* and *woo* and *clap*, exploding into hysteria as it settles on a portcullis at the opposite end of the arena.

“Double trouble...” declares the Games Master.

From the crowds’ response, another fan favourite.

An athletic, spear-wielding duo emerge. A woman and man with chiselled physiques, hair as silver as the sands, and a more colourful rainbow splash of war paint decorating their faces.

“Castooooorrr and Polluuuuux.”

The back and front of their armoured vests sport a single letter. Hers a C for Castor and his a P for Pollux. That answers that question, then. The idea of wearing armour that is only a vest is, to Jasyn’s mind, questionable, but they don’t seem to care as they parade before the crowds, drumming up excitement. The louder the cheers, the more energetic they become, with even the occasional backflip to show off their athletic prowess.

With escalating enthusiasm, the Games Master cries out:

“Let the games begin!”

UNEVEN BATTLES

A siren sounds, punctuated by blazing blue lights.

The gladiators need no further signal as they step over the chalk-line into the silver sands at the arena's centre. The crowds quieten to a simmering tension as the gladiators circle each other from afar, sizing each other up as if encountering their opponent for the first time.

The duo split.

Castor edges towards Herakles in one direction. Pollux circles in the other.

Herakles' powerful stance and defined musculature suggest she has youth and heavy lifting on her side. Her ochre eyes and confident snarl paints her as almost feral.

The double act close in. Two against one hardly seems fair.

And yet, Herakles' smile wields confidence.

With well-practiced timing, the duo strike.

A double jab towards their opponent's midriff is cut short as Herakles simultaneously swipes down on both spearheads with her club.

The crowds go wild. The battle has begun.

The duo lunge and dodge with nimble grace, exaggerating for crowd pleasing-effect. Herakles strides with heavy purpose: her strikes, bone-shuddering, her blocks in the nick of time.

Herakles stomps on one spearhead, anchoring it, grasping the other spear and tugging it, jolting Castor into Pollux with a heavy clunk of armour. Their cries of pain and venomous glares are so severe, Jasyn can only hope their moves are designed, choreographed even, for this questionable kind of entertainment.

The bursts of blood suggest otherwise.

Scratches and scrapes from spears and nail-studded club, have Jasyn wincing and queasy. As a distraction, she surveys her surroundings.

At the metal-mesh barrier, guards keep watch, equipped with comms and truncheons. Above the mesh, viewing boxes protrude high above the arena, no doubt housing the Iolcian elite. Above them but hidden from the view of apparently important people, snipers watch over the crowds like snow-hawks surveying for prey.

Above the stadium looms the glass-fronted viewing chamber of the Ice Palace. It hardly seems real: the Ice Palace being *right there*, connected to the arena. *Best seats in the house*. The overly ornate sculpted ice surrounding the viewing chamber illustrates its importance. Or rather, its occupant's self-declared importance.

From this distance there are no details of what or who watches from behind the thick glass, but there are strangely formed silhouettes. The ruffles of royalty. There are three peaks to the shadow. Two less imposing – the older princess and prince? – flank a sharp and mountainous shape.

Jasyn's vision tunnels.

The village torn to pieces. Friends and family taken. Cries of pain and confusion. The state of this world, bringing all the Ice King has put them through, scroll through her mind like a morbid flick-book bringing bile rising to her throat.

The sky grumbles.

Jasyn forces a ragged breath. The prickling beneath her skin, hazing the air at her fingertips, will do nothing to help

their situation. She stuffs her fists under her armpits, warming her own hands and forcing a measure of calm.

Who knew it was possible to hate a silhouette?

The crowd's collective gasp snaps her back to the arena to witness the aftermath: spears snapped in two, Castor and Pollux lying in separate heaps beyond the chalk-line, gripping their dripping wounds.

Gross.

The ice-screen offers an action replay of the double-thump of Herakles' club and her plucky opponents sailing out of play. The crowd can't contain themselves. Some – likely fans of the spear-wielders, or those with more riding on this game than their own entertainment – express disdain at the outcome. Most are positively delighted.

The crowd cheer “Herakles, Herakles, Herakles,” as the defeated duo are stretchered away, Castor convulsing, Pollux gripping a gushing chest wound. It seems the question of WHO WILL SURVIVE? may not be hyperbole after all.

A spotlight beams on the hero herself as HERAKLES WINNER blazes onto the giant ice-screen in time with the announcer's over-the-top declaration of triumph.

The lights go out and the roulette spotlight sweeps the edge of the arena.

The audience stamp their feet in savage anticipation until the spotlight lands on a new portcullis. The Games Master announces the contender as the “Warden General of the Iolcian Guard... The undefeated champion...”

A barely disguised ripple of disappointment moves through the crowds, dampening the cheers.

“The Gladiatrrrr Priiiinnnnccccc.” The Games Master's voice booms through the awkwardness.

GLADIATOR PRINCESS
UNDEFEATED CHAMPION

The words tear through Jasyn's calibrated calm. The applause that follows is dutiful and on-edge. It looks like Jasyn isn't the only one with an instinctive dislike for the Gladiator Princess.

"Did you do this?" she whispers to Tiphys. It hadn't been a sure thing that the Gladiator Princess would be a contender today.

Tiphys responds with a sly smile.

"I know, I know," says Jasyn. "A magician never reveals his methods. But, really, Tiphys..."

"Let's just say the Games Master owes me." Tiphys' attention remains on the arena.

Herakles' bowed head betrays the look of a dead woman walking. Overriding this with a battle-cry, she plays to the crowds, whipping them back into a frenzy.

The portcullis reels upwards with a clunking crunch, and out steps the black, silver and blue armoured athlete with a familiar weapon. Her emergence into the arena is more sedate than the other contenders. There's a rigidity, an arrogance to the way she moves. Is it confidence, or a lifetime of looking down on people?

The Gladiator Princess – *the Ice Princess* – accepts the spotlight but doesn't pander to the crowds. Perhaps she sees herself as above such things, or she knows there's little point. It's difficult to read her expression, even close up on the ice-screen. Her helmet offers only shadows for eyes.

Jasyn had no idea how odd the knowledge of their shared lineage would feel, nor how an arrogant posture could further fuel her hatred toward a *relative* stranger. The so-called Gladiator Princess carries a shield, a dented disc of metal with the jagged crown of Iolcus. Her armour covers more of her body than the other athletes. Objectively, Jasyn might think the princess more sensible than the others. Wearing more armour is wise when you're the only one in the arena anyone really wants dead.

But no, it's arrogance. It must be. She likely considers herself as less expendable than the gladiators strutting around in their vests.

Whether she's wearing the key to the city, it's not possible to tell. Even in close-up, the pendant – if it is there at all – is hidden under armour.

Forgetting her own anxiety, and that her face threatens to give her away, Jasyn veers from her seat. Atalanta's widened eyes ask, "What are you doing?" and Jasyn insists, "I'll be careful," before continuing out of their low-tier box and down the steps to the mesh-fence to get a closer look.

The siren sounds and blue lights blare.

Both contenders step over the chalk line. Herakles hazards closer to the princess, but hangs back, not willing to be the first to strike. The confidence she boasted before hangs by a thread. Herakles, *Killer of Monsters*, scared to battle the Ice Princess.

Something flickers in Herakles' eyes.

Hatred? Fear?

Jasyn can't decide if Herakles is going to retreat from the princess, or maul her. The other contenders might want the princess dead, but it looks like not even Herakles has the guts to do anything about it. Never mind *feral attack*, Herakles is now more *timid retreat*.

For an age, they circle each other. The audience watch in silence, a menacing cocktail of fear and intrigue, until they mutter boredom.

The Gladiator Princess strikes.

Herakles blocks with her club, but accentuates the impact, as if the princess had been strong enough to knock her back. Though Herakles exaggerates the effect, the princess strikes with confidence: a lifetime of training evident in her well-chosen, nimble moves.

The crowd clap dutifully.

An electric tremor sparks along the princess' sword.

Jasyn presses closer to the mesh-wall, wondering if she imagined it.

Warming to the confrontation, Herakles responds with lumbering but powerful counterblows, deflected or bone-shakingly absorbed by the princess' shield. When Herakles' club descends, clashing with the sword, its Iolcian status is proven in a blink of bright light. The sword ignites and funnels ice across the club, causing Herakles to drop the burning lump.

The crowds *oooooh*, despite themselves. Smatterings of applause are more genuine this time. The battle might be a foregone conclusion, but at least it looks good. Even Herakles replaces her wide-eyed surprise with an impressed smile as she back-steps.

But Jasyn is distracted from this strange reaction to a powerful opponent by the flicker of a smile from under the princess' helmet.

The flick-book of Jasyn's mind stutters a variety of violent ways she could swipe away that smile. Her palm grips the metal mesh as though she were grasping her own sword. She stops when the mesh starts to cool.

Hands into pockets.

At the chalk line, Herakles' own momentum almost tumbles her out of play. The crowd roars as she sidesteps, somehow keeping herself just within the lines.

One false move and the princess stumbles. The quartz-like lump of her pendant slips from under her armour, dangling from her neck. The ice-screen captures the moment in close-up.

Jasyn glances back at the low-tier box to exchange a look of confirmation with Atalanta and Tiphys.

Muscles rippling, (crowds swooning), Herakles lunges forward with an instinctive and almighty kick, knocking the royal sword aside. The crowd gasps as one as she looms over the weaponless princess, locks her hands together, as if brandishing an invisible club, and strikes down.

A hair's breadth from her skull being crushed, the princess rolls aside.

Herakles reclaims her club. The princess must have claimed her sword faster than expected, because Herakles startles at her proximity, turns and swipes.

The might of her club sends a bone-shaking reverberation through the princess' armour.

The Gladiator Princess sails backwards, landing heavily, landing still.

Any animation in the audience is replaced by ear-ringing, ice-cutting silence.

Though she attempts to conceal it, Herakles' panic-widened eyes and the scrunch of her brow suggest she's just discovered the inescapable cavern of a hungry mountain bear.

Dropping her club, she steps towards the fallen princess. Perhaps to check the facts of the situation, perhaps to do something about it, but before she can answer the question of what she's about to do next, metal groans and the armoured princess stirs.

Herakles and the crowd breathe a sigh of relief as the Gladiator Princess clambers to her feet. The relief, seemingly, not on the princess' behalf.

Her exterior dented, her face pained, the Gladiator Princess raises her sword with a necessary wince to let Herakles, the audience, and the sharp silhouette looming in the royal viewing chamber know that she is not defeated yet.

With palpable relief, Herakles adjusts her stance and takes on the challenge.

The crowds echo the sentiment.

As each blow is exchanged, each strike dodged or deflected, the princess fails to wield her sword with her previous precision. Yet, she perseveres. If Jasyn wasn't so busy hating her, she might discover an iota of respect for her.

She may be in pain, but the princess' swift movements and artful dodges are enough to tire even the almighty Herakles.

When the club-wielder takes a moment too long to recover from a deflected attack, the princess takes her opportunity to elbow the crook of Herakles' leg, unbalancing her down to one knee.

A blade across the gladiator's neck. Blood spilling. Death inescapable.

That's what Jasyn expects.

Instead, the princess allows herself one deep breath too many and Herakles turns and swipes, propelling the princess backwards towards the chalk line and knocking the sword from her grasp.

The audience ceases to breathe.

Heel to the chalk, without her weapon, the princess has nowhere left to go. One strike and Herakles owns another victory, but with a fleeting glance at the royal viewing chamber, a flash of understanding passes between the two contenders – so quick Jasyn might have imagined it.

Lumbering a final attack, Herakles stumbles out of play.

A triumphant spotlight beams down onto the princess as the overly enthusiastic Games Master announces: "Gladiator Princess – winner" and harps on about her being the "undefeated champion" again. All while, as disappointed as the crowds, the Gladiator Princess grimaces at her unearned victory.

FAMILIAR STRANGER

Interval over, the Gladiator Princess returns to the arena with muted fanfare, in sharp contrast to the over-enthusiastic announcement from the Games Master. She has more of a strut about her this time, and the heavy set to her jaw suggests she'll be taking no prisoners. Her ice-sword crackles like electricity threatening to bite.

A breeze...? An atmospheric shift...? A song...? A whisper...?

Jasyn whips around.

The lights cut out and the spotlight makes its rounds, lighting up the faces of the crowd intermittently. All eyes on the arena.

She should return to Tiphys and Atalanta, but a flicker of familiarity roams the audience. *Sharp green eyes. Slicked back dark hair. The subtle swagger of street-smart confidence.*

Her mind takes a second to catch up to what her gut has already identified: the thieving duo from the city square are winding their way through the standing audience at the mesh-fence, in a manner suited only to professional thieves.

A breeze...? An atmospheric shift...? A song...? A whisper...?

If it wasn't such a ridiculous notion, Jasyn might think the sword were calling to her. Though perhaps that's no more or less ridiculous than a sword that creates ice.

She might be better off without it, but the injustice of having something stolen from her, and standing by while others unwittingly suffer the same, sits uneasily with her.

As she follows through the crowd, Jasyn's focus is so rigidly trained on the two thieves – working together as seamlessly as two wings, distracting and lifting belongings – she doesn't notice the armed guard in her path.

Her shoulder injury protests at the solid knock against his torso. It takes a second for her to register her fallen hood.

“Sorry,” she says, backing away and returning to its safety.

With a grunt and a glare, the guard chases her away. When she turns to continue, her targets are lost to the crowds.

So much for her sword homing theory.

Keeping her head down, she returns to the metal-mesh at the arena edge to watch over the side-lines. Her eyes hunt the crowd. The clashing of sword against shield in the arena, followed by the booming announcer's voice – “Gladiator Princess – Winner” – and the required applause signals another empty victory.

Once again, another contender is chosen. This one brandishes double daggers and the ability to forward flip and roll. It's a bit much.

The princess outmanoeuvres him with practiced ease, despite her lingering injuries. For this pairing, it's difficult to discern whether she's winning because of her skill, or her opponent's lack thereof.

The spotlight roams.

The next contender wields a giant axe that doubles as a staff. It's all very crowd pleasing, but Jasyn is still seeking the thieves, reminding herself that to confront them would risk too much.

Only when “Gladiator Princess – Winner” is declared again is it time for audience participation. The Games Master announces that it's time for “one lucky individual” to “challenge the undefeated champion.”

The crowds cheer, rediscovering a depth of enthusiasm.

As the audience grows restless, the ice-screen shuffles through the crop of contenders. The plentiful range of citizen mugshots (the same sort that had flitted across the stadium gateway) offer a less chiselled and athletic selection than the official gladiator line-up.

Jasyn holds her breath. If this goes to plan, it won't be long before they'll be trespassing the secret passages of the city in search of those they care about.

The Permit image of Tiphys arrives on the ice-screen.

Jasyn briefly chokes on her own breath. Trust in Tiphys has allowed them this far. If something were to go wrong in the arena, well... that would be game over.

Tiphys jumps up and down, overtly thrilled at this 'random' selection. In a manner befitting a Games fanatic, he excitedly wades through the crowd to the guarded gate to be let into the arena.

The ice-screen scrolls through reaction shots of various audience members, Peleus' jealousy-scribbled face amongst them.

Jasyn joins Atalanta, sharing a tight-lipped smile that can only mean, "Let's hope this works."

Once through the gate, Tiphys' posture buckles a bit. A guard steps in to wrap him in a 'one-size-fits-all' armoured waistcoat that is definitely too big for him. The loudspeaker voice instructs Tiphys to "CHOOSE – YOUR – WEAPON" and a cross-hatched portcullis scrolls up, displaying a selection of possibilities.

The audience call out suggestions. Some shout "sword", others "axe", "mace" and "trident". Tiphys puts on a show of choosing: his hand hovering over one weapon, or even picking it up, testing its weight and scouting the crowd's reaction, before moving to the next.

He'd better be careful The Games don't try to recruit him.

Like the rest of the crowd, Jasyn hopes Tiphys chooses well, but for a more specific reason. For this to work, Tiphys will need to get close to the princess. That rules out trident and anything long. When he chooses a short sword, some of the audience mumble in protest, declaring it the “boring” choice, but Tiphys commits to it by holding his selection high.

Even though he’s not looking, Jasyn nods approval.

“To your starting positions,” the unseen Games Master hollers, and Tiphys looks momentarily lost before copying the Gladiator Princess and standing at the outer rim on the opposite side of the chalk circle.

Close up on the ice-screen, he’s a shade greyer than before.

Peleus had said this part of the games was a bit of fun. Perhaps Jasyn should have checked more thoroughly on his definition of fun.

Bold font blazes across the ice-screen: GLADIATOR PRINCESS VS TIPHYS, in time with the announcement.

No sooner do sirens and lights signal the battle to commence, Tiphys charges the princess and the crowds scream approval.

A plucky start.

The princess deflects him with ease. Struggling even with the weight of his short sword, Tiphys tries again. Sniggers emerge from the audience and Jasyn represses the urge to slap them.

Tiphys’ brow furrows. He’d planned to be heroic, not to be ridiculed.

The Gladiator Princess offers an easy jab or two. It would appear she’s at least trying to make it look like Tiphys has a chance to triumph, even if everyone knows he won’t be winning this play fight.

Cruel.

Back and forth they spar, until Tiphys trips.

The crowd laugh. If Jasyn hadn't wanted to slap their stupid faces before...

The Gladiator Princess holsters her sword and steps closer. Crouched by the boy, her mouth is moving, and he's nodding, but no sound carries for the audience to hear. He looks terrified and about to burst into tears.

Jasyn almost slicks her hands through her hair with the stress, but her hood stops her. *This was a terrible plan.* It's one thing putting herself in harm's way, but a youngster like Tiphys? Never mind hating the Ice Princess, Jasyn's starting to hate herself a little.

The Games Master has something to say about Tiphys' trip not being "a winning strategy", but Tiphys dusts himself off and it's only a matter of moments before the play fight continues.

Loudspeakers screech feedback, making the crowd unanimously wince. Someone has the sense to mute the speakers. There's a shuffling of guards around the Games Master's booth, but the arena display continues, and Tiphys' confidence grows in line with his grin.

Sound system static slices through the stadium again. "Play it," instructs an unknown voice before the Games Master stammers, enthusiasm sapped, "Um... W-w-well... Citizens of Iolcus. We have an unexpected first..."

The play-battle continues as the ice-screen above the arena displays an action replay. In slow motion, the moving images zero in on the moment Tiphys tripped, to the moment the Gladiator Princess crouched to him, to the moment he held onto her shoulder to stand, and the flick of his fingers claiming the pendant from around her neck and retracting it up his sleeve.

A collective gasp shudders the stadium.

Fear grips Jasyn's stomach and throat.

Disquiet tremors the sky.

Even the Games Master offers only the screech of a muffled exhalation.

The odd atmosphere has the Gladiator Princess and Tiphys pausing to figure out what the fuss is about. She checks her neck. Sure enough, the quartz-lump is gone.

Wide-eyed, trembling, Tiphys quivers, not unlike a creature learning of its own imminent end. As the Gladiator Princess steps closer, his knuckles whiten about his short sword.

Jasyn's heartrate climbs skyward. If the Gladiator Princess dares hurt him—

Heavens. This is all my fault.

The princess' mouth moves. Whatever she's saying entices a terrified nod from the boy. She holds out her hand to him, palm up. Tiphys must think it some kind of trick, or is merely petrified, for he doesn't move. She places her sword on the silver sand and steps closer to him, carefully, in case the startled creature might bolt.

Time stretches to fill the captivated silence.

Tiphys' shaking arm extends, with the pendant hanging from his grip. It drops from his hand into the princess', all captured in painful slow close-up on the looming ice-screen. The games master must see an opportunity, for the words PUNISH or PARDON blaze onto the ice-screen, as if this were all part of the game.

Tiphys' chances of survival dwindle with each passing moment.

"We have to help him," signs Atalanta, as Jasyn's mind races to figure out how.

Think... Think...

The metal mesh barrier between the audience and the arena is taller than Jasyn would manage before being picked at by ice-bullets. She follows the contours of the grandstand, connecting to a series of staggered roofed viewing boxes. They, at least, are higher.

"You know how I said I wouldn't do anything stupid?" she signs.

“I’ll watch your back,” signs Atalanta with a nod.

Wading away from the arena, through the thick crowds, Jasyn approaches the viewing boxes. Using the wall ahead of her as a stepping stone, she leaps up onto the roof of the first viewing box. With all eyes on the arena, and mumbles in the audience gaining confidence and veering between “punish” and “pardon” the only resistance Jasyn meets is her healing shoulder pulsing protest.

The safety net of Atalanta’s eyes watching over her, she presses on.

Not knowing how much time she has, or at what moment the princess will strike, Jasyn leaps from one viewing box up to the next, as fast as she’s able. Running across boulders in the mountains was far more fun, but then, the creatures of the peaks tended not to brandish automatic weapons.

By the time ice-bullets clip at her heels, Jasyn is already racing towards the edge of the highest viewing box, the mesh-fence of the arena within her sights.

Leaping from the roof, her arms swim mid-air for a few strokes before she crashes into the mesh, undulating the entire wall.

She sets to scaling and conquering the remaining few measures, until she reaches the awkward and sharp summit.

The last time she’d reached such heights, she was scaling cliff faces. It might have felt more of a welcome return to a pastime if it weren’t for the poker-hot burn in her wounded shoulder, extending through her like tentacles with teeth, and the impending doom biting around her in bullets.

Once on the other side of the mesh-fence, gravity assists her downward journey. She descends in unpredictable, jagged motions to dodge the bullets flying her way.

How is she not dead yet?

The guards must be preoccupied, or have been told to stand down, for nothing life-threatening hits her. Still, all it would take is one bullet, so she jumps the final drop before her screaming shoulder gives out, landing her in bone-juddering

fashion on her back in the silver-grey sand of the arena. Her shoulder acknowledges the ungraceful landing with an unwelcome lash of inner electricity.

How her hood manages to remain in place is a mystery.

Gasps of shock and delight ripple through the audience. Jasyn wants to scream at them that *this isn't a Game*.

Between her own winded gasps, she hazards to her feet to find not only the entire crowd's focus burning into her, but the curious Gladiator Princess and Tiphys, too.

The crowds mumble intrigue.

Guards fumble to enter the arena, but the Gladiator Princess motions for them to stand down. Perhaps to get a better look at this stranger invading her space, the princess removes her helmet. As she approaches, her expressive brow migrates between confusion, suspicion and intrigue.

There's an essence to her features that Jasyn has seen in her own reflection, though she can't quite decipher it. Her eyes remind Jasyn of the glacial blue-green of the ice-field cavities that had threatened to swallow them. Her hair, while technically in the realm of the same colour as her own, has more of a lustre, an electric blond shimmer born of a luxurious life. And yet, it's tied back pragmatically.

Jasyn isn't sure what she expected. Perhaps that her every hair would be perfectly placed; porcelain skin. But she looks more warrior than vapid princess.

Which doesn't bode well for Jasyn's current predicament.

Death and chaos do seem to orbit her as closely as Corinth does Iolcus. She is under no illusion of which way the odds are stacked. Her life now depends on figuring out a way forward. At this point, *survival* sounds unrealistically optimistic.

"I think you are lost, friend." The Gladiator Princess' tone is neutral.

Reinflating her lungs enough to speak, Jasyn gasps: "I challenge you."

Whispers and mutters in the crowds ask, “What did she say?” as Jasyn steals a few more breaths to power her words.

“I challenge you, princess. If I win, you let the boy go.”

And, at this twist, the audience bursts into applause.

JASYN WITH A Y

Being watched over by the tyrant Ice King and demanding battle with his daughter – Gladiator Princess, fabled *Princess Killer* and Warden General of the Iolcian Guard - is exactly the opposite of where Jasyn's parents would want her to be. But, with uncountable civilian and sniper mouths agape, at this point it is too late to do much about it.

Her whole life, Jasyn has been hidden away for her own safety, and now every inch of her itches under the heat of the unforgiving spotlight that can only pave the way to death. Her breath catches. The pit is more terrifying than any mountain bear's nest. Bears only want to survive. The Ice King and his daughter want to entertain.

Jasyn spies her image on the ice-screen and readjusts her hood to obscure her face. Gus had recognised her heritage. It likely won't help her cause if the audience or Ice Royals recognise her, too. Though, at this point, the word *inevitable* springs to mind.

"If you'll not share your face, at least share with us your name." The Gladiator Princess' calculating eyes patronise her.

"Jasyn," she mumbles, to a ripple of crowd confusion.

"You must speak up," says the princess.

Jasyn's insides coil into a hateful knot. *Give me a sword, princess, and I'll speak volumes.*

Jasyn glowers. Apparently her hatred has her overconfident in her fledgling sword abilities.

The princess' blade crackles a gleaming grin that reminds Jasyn – pointedly – that she is unarmed, and that what happens next is in the hands of the *Ice Princess*.

“Jasyn. My name is Jasyn.”

The princess nods her approval to the Games Master's booth. The crowd's mutters tangle with confusion and glee as pre-recorded sounds celebrate, and the ice-screen ignites with the word:

JASON

That's not the name your parents gave you, thinks Jasyn as she raises her voice to the princess: “It's spelt with a Y...”

A quirked eyebrow suggests the princess hadn't expected corrections, but she nods to the booth all the same and the ice-screen alters, with a repeat of *ta-da* sound effects:

JAYSON

The princess' sarcastic half-bow seems to question “How's that?” which amuses the crowd and tightens Jasyn's anger-knot. Is this what happens if you grow up royal? Or is this what it is to be the offspring of the Ice King?

Jasyn sighs. *If you're going to die, you may as well get the details right.*

“No, it's ‘J-A-S-Y-N’.”

Is the princess' expression annoyance or amusement? It's not impossible to imagine her hurling her blade at Jasyn right there and then. Instead, she quirks her eyebrow – a gesture Jasyn already hates – and Jasyn wonders whether she'll survive long enough to understand what the annoying expressions mean. The princess nods and the ice-screen blasts...

JASYN

...over the live-feed image of Jasyn's hood-obscured face. CHOOSE – YOUR – WEAPON, instructs the screen, in time with the Games Master's announcements. War drums hammer, ratcheting Jasyn's heartbeat.

A breeze...? An atmospheric shift...? A song...? A whisper...?

The sounds have Jasyn's senses swimming. She turns to their origin, but only a wall of roaring crowd responds.

Legs shaking, Tiphys retreats to the arena edge, but not so close any reaching audience arms can claim him.

The weapon display cranks open, but before Jasyn reaches for a lifeline, a *clunk* in the sand behind her brings another possibility into play.

A breeze...? An atmospheric shift...? A song...? A whisper...?

Its presence coils about her senses.

There, within her reach, is her stolen ice-sword.

The thieving duo are lost to the shadows. They must have pushed the weapon through the mesh. But why? Why are thieves helping her? Are they? Is this sword going to help or hinder? Do they merely want a good show?

Rising certainty tells Jasyn she's not getting out of this alive. She claims the sword with the fabric of her cape to guard the element of surprise.

The least she can give is a good show.

Even if she were to win the battle, there's no shape of events she can imagine that would see a thief and a dissident set free. Especially not before a crowd that demands to be entertained, and an Ice King who oversees the order.

With the measured steps of the condemned headed for the gallows, Jasyn arrives at the chalk line, opposite the princess. Cool, alert eyes observe her face, but if the princess recognises Jasyn's lineage, she doesn't show it.

"You have no armour," says the princess. "It hardly seems a fair fight." She removes her protective layers and places them in the sand. "And you might want to remove the cape. Such things tend to get snagged."

It's a trick. It must be. The Ice Princess isn't kind. The suggestion annoys Jasyn. Probably everything the princess has to say would annoy her. But, on this, she has a point.

Dropping her inert sword at her feet, but keeping her eyes trained on the Gladiator Princess, Jasyn unhooks her cape. Hood attached, it drops to the sand.

“An interesting colour choice,” says the princess with an unreadable expression that might be a smirk.

I'll slice the smirk off that royal face. Will it make her think twice about sending an army to obliterate a village? Probably not. Will it feel good? There's only one way to find out.

Covering her palm with her sleeve, Jasyn reclaims her sword.

The siren sounds and blue lights blare.

The Gladiator Princess steps over the line.

Jasyn waits until they're mere paces apart before slipping her fingers about the hilt, enticing the blade to bloom electric as she lunges forward.

Gasps and excited chatter ricochet across the stadium, geysers startling themselves into a chain reaction.

A quick backward shuffle later, the princess' training must kick in, for she deflects Jasyn's hacking and puts enough distance between them to attempt to process what's happening.

“Iolcian Ice?” Uncertainty wavers her voice. “Daughter of Alcimede and Aeson?” is all she manages before Jasyn slices wildly at her again.

The Gladiator Princess sidesteps and regroups; a genuine attack must be new territory for her, let alone one with a fabled ice-sword.

Ice-swords clash and spark, frazzling the air.

The Gladiator Princess stumbles.

Jasyn advances, but the world slips out from under her. Her sword drops from her grip. Before she can even think the

words *ice slick*, she's back to the sand, the pain in her shoulder sparking as sharp as clashing swords as she, too, is rendered an inert lump.

As the crowd ripples with laughter (*is a graceful landing too much to ask?*), sparks roar across the sky, forking and pulsing like the pain in her shoulder and her skittering nerves. Scrawled across the sky, clouds clash and conflict; two weather fronts in a skirmish.

A glance at the Gladiator Princess, looking as unsettled as the weather, sees the tip of her sword still touched to the sand-turned-ice. A neat trick. Good enough, judging by the guffawing crowd, to make Jasyn look a fool.

But the Gladiator Princess isn't laughing, and neither is Jasyn.

Regaining her footing and her breath in line with her rising anger, Jasyn scoops up her sword. It ripples glacial blue and bright white as she launches a renewed attack.

Sidestepping the iced patch of sand, her blade meets the princess', unleashing uncontrolled ice-splinters, surprising and slicing them both. There isn't time to think about the sting of bloody nicks decorating Jasyn's face as – with controlled strikes – the princess drives her determinedly backwards towards the chalk line.

Her perfectly timed strikes speak of innate ability or dedicated training. Hardly surprising. The Ice Princess might not encounter much resistance in her 'battles', but that doesn't mean she's incapable when pushed.

Which is exactly what Jasyn is discovering as her sword is knocked from her grasp, and she buckles to the sand.

Sword raised, the Gladiator Princess looms over her. But in that moment her arrogance and confidence are gone. Doubt and confusion enter her eyes, as if she's trying to decipher and answer an impossible question.

What is she waiting for?

The hatred. The blame. It vibrates beneath Jasyn's fingertips, under her skin. Something snaps, zapping a cool

current through her.

The princess gasps and lurches – eyes wide and lips bloodied – as the ice-air is plucked from her lungs.

Yeah... Jasyn's never done that before.

She takes her chance to boot the princess out of play. GAME OVER declares the ice-screen to a backdrop of stunned silence, followed by JASYN – WINNER as the automatic spotlight beams onto her, sweat-soaked and gasping, rage hazing the air at her palms.

From the depths of silence, unsettling whispers of “Queen Alcimedede... It's the queen...” rise. Reclaiming her sword, she leaps atop the dazed princess. Blade poised at her neck, the princess is finally at her mercy, wheezing to recover from her lost breath. From the point of blade-contact, ice crawls up the princess' throat.

Perspiration glistens on the princess' brow and Jasyn notices the almost hidden jagged line of an old scar across her face, not unlike the Ice King's jagged crown.

Angular ice-crown motifs. Military trucks roaring through the village. Villagers screaming. Gunshots. Chaos. Blood.

“You take what isn't yours.” Jasyn's words burn her throat. “Why should I not do the same?” She presses her blade closer.

It could be a trick of the light, or Jasyn's own confusion, but the terror in the princess' eyes glints as clear as frozen lake water. As much as Jasyn would like to be the cause of her discomfort, her fear appears to be directed not towards Jasyn, but the royal viewing chamber.

Her eyes flit back to Jasyn.

“You - don't - remember - me,” the princess gasps, her struggling breath emerging as a frigid, desperate plume.

What does that mean?

Before Jasyn can find out, the princess's body goes limp. The grip of ice about her neck must have been too much. Whether it's consciousness or life lost, Jasyn isn't sure.

Hail. No. It doesn't feel good.

And it's about to get much worse...

The Ice King's glass viewing chamber descends at such alarming velocity there's no doubt in Jasyn's mind that what's about to unfold will have life-altering consequences.

Thick glass doors slide open with a hiss that shouldn't be audible in an arena so packed. The Ice King strides out, the anger on his sour face mirrored in the stadium-framed skies.

Eyes as sharp as flint and as blue as burning ice freeze her in place. Though, not literally. (At least, not yet.)

“ENOUGH.”

The roar ricochets across the arena, clawing from one screeching loudspeaker to the next, cutting through Jasyn's panic, scoring it deeper.

Lightning flickers within the snow-globe encased within the crux of his staff and Jasyn is reminded of the timepiece glowering over the Ice City square. And of the concept that time and luck can, and have, run out.

AN ICY INTERVENTION

Jasyn fights the urge to stumble back.

The wild snarl of a mountain bear would be preferable to the spine-chilling glower in the tyrant king's eyes, promising to cut her into a thousand pieces.

Without warning, ice-tendrils whip out from the Ice King's staff. With startling precision, the lasso steals the ice-sword from Jasyn's grasp, slicing her forearm in the process.

It stings, but Jasyn can barely grimace before the lasso splinters into a mesh with enough lightning momentum to swat her aside. Face first, she skids across the ice-patch until she grinds to a stop on the silver sands.

Her nose aches like a missed cliff-grip and unforgiving gravity. Stunned silence rings through the stadium. Are the audience afraid? Entertained?

Fumbling to her feet, she splutters blood. Her sliced skin crackles, crystals scalding her at every point of ice-tendril contact. Hand bracing the wound at her forearm, she entices the ice to melt.

With one eye on the Ice King and another on the unmoving princess, Jasyn reaches for her sword, but a whip from the Ice King's staff knocks it beyond reach. She tries again, but, with a dark smile etched on his face, the Ice King repeats his action.

When he looks to his audience, they applaud with unsettling sincerity.

"Behold," bellows the Ice King.

Behold? Who says that? Jasyn resents the notion that she'll meet her end by the ice-staff of someone who uses the word 'behold'. *The universe is so unjust.*

"The rotten fruit of Alcimede's womb."

Jasyn's sure there's no compliment lurking in that phrase as the Ice King's voice booms across the arena.

"The ill-starred child. The source of our eternal winter."

Unsettled murmurs rumble until the crowds are chanting "Kill. Kill. Kill." with the kind of venom that has no cure. Of course they hate her. She's the reason their children aren't here. She's the supposed source of ice and all Iolcian ills.

But if survival isn't possible, truth will have to do.

"You're a murderer," are the words that claw their way through the churning cloud of Jasyn's mind. "You sent an army to destroy villages..." She calls out to the crowd, needing them to know the actions of their king.

"There is a terrible disease in the Outer Regions," says the Ice King at broadcast volume.

Before she can get her next words out, a rope of ice lashes from the Ice King's staff and coils its burning coldness around her neck. Instant frostbite pulls a feral growl from her in a plume of frozen air.

The Ice King's smile suggests he enjoys the struggle as he reels her in.

Jasyn attempts to dig her heels into the sand, with inconsistent success. Try as she might, she cannot match his power. This must be what a fish on a hook feels like.

"You destroyed our village... You took our lives..." Tears of frustration hammer behind her eyes. "What did you do with the people you stole?" Her voice rasps, hindered by the anchor of the tightening noose.

If she can find out *something*, maybe Atalanta will hear and be able to rescue them... *Maybe*... Jasyn claws at the skin-scalding ice-rope but may as well be grasping at burning straws.

“Only the dead will tell you that,” whispers the Ice King with a dark smile. “You’ll find out soon enough.” His dull stone eyes glint as his acrid breath clouds by her ear. Exterior frozen in time, decay within.

Ice creeps sharply across her skin, aching in her bones. The coiling pressure strains the vertebrae in her neck. Pressure punches her temples. In her vision, darkness dances. Her skin burns. Her lungs scream. Has the sweat in her pores and air in her lungs crystalised to daggers? Gus’ words about the Ice King being a “one-man army” toy with Jasyn’s nerves like a snow-devil.

The pressure lets loose so suddenly, dropping her heavily to the ground, it might be all over.

Tendrils of ice lash out, wrapping around a soaring arrow, as if sensing the incoming danger. The arrow freezes and cracks into shards, crumbling at the Ice King’s feet.

Heaving in a sharp breath, Jasyn’s eyes hunt the crowd, but the details of the upheaval are lost to distance. The ice-screen frames the drama in close-up as Atalanta struggles against a mass of guards.

“No,” cries Jasyn.

The Ice King’s focus veers to her. With a flicker of a smile, he clamps his forearm about her neck.

“For so long,” he bellows, turning to his audience, “I have kept a tight rein on the infection of winter...”

A tight rein? If Jasyn weren’t so terrified about Atalanta’s predicament, she’d scoff at the Ice King’s ignorance or denial of this world’s meteorological state. And yet, more chilling than the Ice King’s grip about her throat, the audience mumbles agreement.

“Without me, the ill-starred child would have us all in frozen tombs. She, and any who support her, any who have succumbed to her disease, curse us with winter and lies.”

Jasyn’s sure there’s a saying about *pots and tea-kettles* for this sort of situation, but her focus is stolen by the Ice King’s

insistence that she look up at the ice-screen and Atalanta's ongoing struggle.

The Ice King points his ice-staff at Atalanta. "Kill her."

The sharpness of his ice sears Jasyn's throat. She wrestles the burning ice-rope lashed about her wrists, savaging her palms in the process.

Her cut flesh spills blood, but Jasyn keeps kicking.

On the overbearing ice-screen, Atalanta puts up a worthy fight against her half-dozen captors. The scuffle is short-lived as – *crack... crack... crack...* – a guard fires three ice-pellets into her back. The shots ricochet through the silent stadium and the cavern of Jasyn's mind, jolting her as though the bullets were in her own flesh.

As the light fades from Atalanta's eyes, the filament fruit of Jasyn's heart smashes, obliterated under tyrant boot. Her turmoil erupts in a cry so sudden and gut-wrenching it crackles the stadium speakers.

Which is nothing compared to the lightning ripping purple, green, and blue across the sky. An aurora imploding, a galaxy churning, threatening a rip in time itself, tearing the heart of the skies in two.

Even the Ice King casts Jasyn aside to look up at the pandemonium.

Lightning lashes at stadium spires.

The audience cry out.

Frozen air cloying her lungs, the air hazes around Jasyn so thick she could swim through it, or be drowned by it.

Ice bursts within her body. Beneath her skin, the network of her veins shines white and blue. Rage and despair vie for supremacy, pumping through every part of her, hammering her eardrums.

The open wound in the sky shudders hail with bruising force. The terror of the battered crowds and the building stampede does nothing to ground her.

“Monster...” is all she can manage.

“According to them...” his voice of a volume for just Jasyn, the Ice King indicates the half-jeering, half-terrified crowds, “...you’re the monster.”

He raises his voice above the building storm for the fleeing crowds:

“Behold. The rotten fruit. The ill-starred child. The infection on our world.” The words flood fast, as if even he might be unsettled by the chaos churning the skies.

The stampede slows. Audience attention captured.

A lash of ice scoops up Jasyn’s inert sword and casts it into the Ice King’s expectant hand. The metal remains a blunt lump in his grasp as he presses it against the flesh beneath her ribs. The burning ice-rope lashed about her wrist forces Jasyn’s hand towards the hilt in an inevitable arm wrestle.

Energy wrung from her, Jasyn’s palm contacts the hilt and the blade’s sharpness blooms into her flesh so suddenly, so deeply. Agony spikes within her every fibre, so severe it doubles back on itself in an unending loop. The more it hurts, the more the blade bites, an undulating serration spiking into her, over and over.

The ground erupts.

Waves of pain turn to waves of ice. An epic splash in a furious ocean.

As the jagged edges reach deeper into her, the Ice King and his putrid breath whisper:

“You think your precious villagers cared about you?” He sneers. “The girl who brought them ice one day and snow the next?”

“No, that’s not...” Jasyn splutters.

“Look at you.” His words spit through his snarl. “Nothing but a little girl who can’t control her ice.”

The crowd’s fervent cheers battle Jasyn’s agonised cries as her ruptured lungs drown in blood. If she wasn’t busy being

shoved over the threshold of death, she might take offence.

At a waterlogged distance, that voice gives the order to “Kill him, too.” With the ice-sword tugged from her, the figurative knife splits Jasyn open all over again with the clear confirmation that Tiphys, too, has been dragged down by the undertow of this ill-fated plan.

The Ice King casts her to the ground as if she’s nothing. A mere flicker of a match-flame trying to take on the inevitable ice of a mountain.

Darkness seeps into her vision, bleeding the world away as Atalanta’s extinguished eyes pull into the tide of her thoughts. Sharpened tears fall to form ice-crystal patterns on the silver sand.

Emotionally and physically skewered, Jasyn’s final frozen blood-filled gasp puffs out in a cloud as the storm above and within fizzles and dies.

PART V

HEAVENS ABOVE AND BELOW!

MUSIC OF LIFE

Z
Z Z

The sharpness in your gut dulls to a distant ache.

The field around you sways with golden wheat, tall and shimmering. The sun blazes in the caramel sky.

At the creaking of branches, you turn.

A light blazes from the impossibly large tower of a gnarly oak.

Suspicious, but attracted by its light, you approach its tangle of above ground roots. Its bark is brown and gold, quite unlike any tree you've seen before. The item glowing in its highest branches draws your attention up, up, up, so high, you imagine a giant might have placed it there.

You wish Atalanta could see this.

Your equilibrium protests. Vertigo forces your focus back to the ground as music reverberates over the horizon, quaking the ground and the chambers of your mind. The stringed instrument is unfamiliar to your ears. Its morbid melody creeps into your pores, dripping through your veins, clawing at your insides, biting beneath your ribs.

An invisible blade twists inside you, burning from within.

Synaptic tremors fizzle in the sky.

All you can do is buckle, clamp your eyes shut, listen to your own ragged breaths, and wait for the sounds and pain to carry away on the unknown musical tide.

A cool palm to your cheek. You open your eyes.

Darkness.

A lifetime or a moment has passed.

Shadows writhe around you, as thick and untrustworthy as the lush, hanging vines. You've been here before, if only fleetingly, in mind, not body. The walled garden under a trio of moons of an unfamiliar sky.

The music grows distant, needling behind your eyes like a tension headache.

The woman from your dreams steps into the moonlight. If you had forgotten her name, the melodic voice on the gentle breeze reminds you it is "Medea". Her dark gown and hair drift, ethereal tentacles hypnotising you. It must have something to do with reduced gravity. Or perhaps this is what happens in the realm of dreams or death.

The deep purple of her eyes is as intoxicating as berry wine. The shimmer beneath the surface, the glint in her eyes, ignites your curiosity. The feeling must be mutual because her eyes hunt you, as if searching for answers.

"Who are you?" You manage a whisper, confessing the gravity of your fascination despite yourself.

Her smile suggests she finds you, or the question, amusing. With her crooked smile, she dares you to trust her. As the melody caresses your ears, her breath a balm of honey, the notes of her voice return to you in an echo you understand.

"I bring light where there is darkness. Water where there is desert. Warmth where there is cold. I am the Cure you seek. I am Guardian of the Golden Fleece."

A haunting tremolo erupts from the skies, scorching the ground like wildfire, clouding your senses. Lava in your veins. Its encore reverberates within your chest as fully as an entire string section swarming with fire-ants trapped beneath your ribs.

The vines of the midnight garden part, pulled as taut as straining vocal cords.

Eyes.

Vacant.

Lifeless.

Staring from the shadows.

You lose more than a breath as the music bleeds through you and – with each slice of a chord – a new figure interrupts your view. Their collective mass stacks so high they block the magic of the moonlight.

The mysterious stranger, Medea of your dreams, angles your chin, forcing you to fall into the well of her eyes. The ripples on their surface plead with you. Her silken voice wraps around you as she retreats into the dark, leaving behind only her echo:

“Find me, Jasyn of Iolcus. Listen to the music of life...”

INSTRUMENTS OF DEATH

Notes of musical wonder vibrate muscle and bone, tugging at every fibre as the tectonic plates of organs reform and settle. Blood channels through cavities: a trickle, then a surge.

Jasyn's body aches from skull to skin, organs to atoms. Her head buzzes with confusion.

The blade, the barrier, no longer occupying her torso, her flesh reforms, impossibly. The throb in her shoulder ebbs away. The bloody bullet furrow in her upper arm fades. Her ice-sliced palms, throat, forearms and face soothe. With each passing note, damage – mortal or otherwise – is sewing back together, burning unapologetically until the sensations dissipate but don't fully disappear. Her busted nose and crushed throat scaffold themselves into shape. The bridge to breathing rebuilt, Jasyn sucks in a mighty gulp of air.

Is this an extension of her inner landscape, her world of dreams? *Is this death?*

At least if she's dead, there's a possibility she can be with Atalanta...

A decaying, festering stench assaults her nostrils.

Carcasses plague the dark. If this is what it is to be either dead or alive, she's not sure she wants part of whichever it is. Surrounded by shapes of the dead, buried by bodies, a jolt of adrenaline sends Jasyn clawing up through the mound, towards the cold and uninviting light. Past limbs, torsos and open mouths formed in bitter surprise. With an array of wounds on display, and the occasional THE GAMES flag

amongst the bloody mess, this is presumably the scrapheap of those who didn't make it into the stadium, and those who didn't make it out. Perhaps their crime was being Un-Permitted, or not toeing the line, or just being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

It's not far to the top of the heap, but too far measured in lives lost.

As she crests the summit, Jasyn tangles in a cord or wire, or *something*. Scrambling free from the corpse-avalanche, she lands with her chin pressing to the coarse ground. *Biting* would be a better description, as the floor has the appearance of teeth. Not the kind from human mouths, but the kind one might imagine on the serrated tongue of an ancient monster. Such things don't exist on Iolcus, if at all, and are only the fuel of nightmares. Jasyn can only hope she'll wake soon. Or find a rational explanation.

She can't hear anything, she realises. Her ears are covered. She pushes whatever it is off her, deciphering them to be over-ear headphones, trailing a wire into the dark.

A cloaked woman, her hooded black gown apparently designed to be at one with the shadows, swoops to protect the tendrils of her instrument. Jasyn's first thought on seeing the dark gown is of Medea, but there's nothing ethereal about the woman helping Jasyn untangle the wires.

"Be careful with those." Her tone is the kind an adult might use on a child who should know better. The effect on Jasyn is an odd, if short-lived, desire for approval, which is ridiculous; she doesn't even know this woman, let alone what she's doing here and where *here* even is.

Too busy chasing her lost breaths, her skin crawling with disgust, and her mind writhing in horror and confusion, Jasyn fails to give voice to her many questions. The stranger snaps a stick-ice torch into illumination. Wearing dark gloves to prevent palm burn, she holds the torch up, either to inspect Jasyn or to see her face.

Only the woman's eyes are visible above the black fabric medi-mask. From the smooth contours of her skin, she must be

no more than ten sun-orbits Jasyn's senior. And yet, that estimate could inflate by another ten sun-orbits to account for the haunted undercurrent torturing her eyes. Her scowl does what it can to disguise the bubbling emotions lurking beneath. Or perhaps it's nothing more than a trick of the light.

With a deep breath, the woman holds her mask aside.

"I am Doctor Orpheus," she says, a twitch of a smile usurped by irritation. "I will be your Medician today." And with that, she covers her mouth again and breathes.

The light travels far enough for Jasyn to catch glimpses of the woman's well-worn five-stringed matt black V-iolin and the wires snaking from it to the headphones. Is that what brought her back to life?

Impossible...

From her memories of the Shard, such instruments are filed under the MYTH section. Before Jasyn aligns her thoughts and vocal cords to ask what exactly a Medician is, a familiar voice explains:

"It's a mix of medic and musician." The tone is unmistakably *Cool, right?* Jasyn swivels to find Tiphys with his own stick-ice torch, picking bits of crud from his hair. He huffs. "I don't feel so good."

"You're alive?" Jasyn croaks, not convinced the realm of death isn't somehow mocking her. The Ice King surely would have killed him. *He did, didn't he?* Come to think of it, the Ice King undoubtedly did kill her...

The sharp memory of the ice-sword slicing through her torso draws Jasyn's hands to where still-damp blood soaks her torn shirt black in the limited cool torchlight. The skin beneath displays only the whisper of a wound, but the echo still burns beneath. *Heavens*. Everything aches.

Jasyn buries her groan, not sure which part of herself to soothe.

"It'll wear off," says the doctor.

"What will?"

“You feel like your whole body’s got menstrual cramps, right? Like every organ is having its own period?”

That about sums it up. Jasyn nods.

“That’s what this feels like?” says Tiphys, and Jasyn’s not sure whether the look on his face is horror or respect.

“Temporary pain or permanent death,” says the doctor. “You tell me which is preferable.” Tiphys opens his mouth to answer. “Rhetorical, Tiphys.”

Okay... So, apparently Tiphys knows everyone.

“Good job the Ice King froze you from the inside out,” says Doctor Orpheus, returning her attention to Jasyn.

Jasyn can only scowl because *in what world is that a good thing?* The doctor sighs as if she thinks Jasyn simple. With a roll of her eyes, she adds:

“Lower body temperature.” As if that explains everything. “I wouldn’t have been able to find you otherwise.”

Thumbing beneath her ribs, Jasyn is convinced there are lines of scar tissue. “I was dead...” *How is this possible?*

“Yes, yes. Now, can we get out of this rot-heap and have mundane realisations and paradigm shifts elsewhere? I haven’t time to explain the workings of the universe to you.” The doctor packs her V-iolin into a case, then into a triangular suitcase that must be her medical case. “The effects of death can be disorientating.” Her manner is so matter of fact, Jasyn almost laughs. “But you’ll just have to keep up. You might be the lost heir, but I’m not dying because you forgot how to put one foot in front of the other.”

She sure has a *way* about her.

After placing a stick-ice torch wrapped in a black handkerchief into Jasyn’s numb hand, Doctor Orpheus takes the lead, trekking over the corpse-boulders as though she were on some hiking expedition.

Tiphys catches up to her, lending them the appearance of two stars travelling in the night sky.

If Tiphys is alive... If *she* is alive...

“Wait. Where’s my—” *Friend? Playmate? Everything? More?* It hardly seems the time to be stumbling on definitions. “Atalanta. Where is she? Is she alive?” asks Jasyn, scouring the surrounding carcasses whose drawn expressions and deadly contortions flood her veins with nausea.

“We’ll certainly be dead if you don’t get a move on,” says Doctor Orpheus without stopping.

But Jasyn can’t move forward without Atalanta, or at least without knowing she’s alive and safe.

Cranking mechanisms lurch the floor, knocking her to one knee. The stick-ice torch lands amongst the floor-teeth; the strange cilia moving back and forth rhythmically, shuffling the bodies forward.

What if they’re not in the mouth of a monster, but in its bowels instead?

An un-oiled screech of metal on metal shudders through Jasyn as she looks ahead to the conveyor belt’s destination: glinting, grinding machinations and a blur. A roaring furnace.

Fear slaps her with the impact of a crumbling ice shelf.

Atalanta? Where is she? Bracing against the figurative wave, Jasyn staggers upright. If the tunnel piled high with human decay makes her sick to her stomach, the idea that Atalanta is amongst them makes her sick down to her cells.

“If you want to stay on the right side of life and death, I’d suggest hurrying up,” calls Doctor Orpheus in a hoarse whisper, but Jasyn is too busy reclaiming the stick-ice torch, hunting the scrap heap and too aware of the conveyor’s scroll towards doom.

That this isn’t a place to be lingering is deathly obvious, but she can’t leave without Atalanta. Not even if it means losing the life she’s only just *inexplicably* regained.

ENCORE

Jaws roar blue-white flames as the monstrous machine chomps human meat. Its proximity grows ever closer: a stationary beast reeling in its prey.

There.

At the dull perimeter of torchlight, a patchwork of blue and green.

Familiar but for its pallid state, a hand hangs limp from its sleeve amongst the mortified masses. The voice in Jasyn's head tells her that this cannot be Atalanta; that it's impossible to have found her in a chamber so dark and cluttered.

Ignoring the voice, she clambers across the unsteady obstacles.

Nausea floods her as she struggles to pull Atalanta from the pile. Weighed down by too many bodies, Jasyn digs aside the putrid remains of one corpse after another.

Jaws of death threaten to bite. Blue flames promise pain and death as the snap of the machine's jaws scroll closer.

As Jasyn asks the silent question, *How are they going to get out of this?* the universe responds with Doctor Orpheus assisting in lugging aside unwanted blockades, with an accompaniment of colourful curses centred around the theme of *What planet is Jasyn on?* and *They better not fucking die because of this.*

Finally unearthing Atalanta, Jasyn tugs a little too hard, tumbling backwards and taking Atalanta with her. Without

life, devoid of her innate grace, her body flops onto Jasyn. The glow of the furnace paints her lips an unwelcome blue.

There isn't time to dwell.

Jasyn lifts Atalanta as best she can across the body-boulders, away from the jaws of destruction. Doctor Orpheus is quick to assist, and once they're far enough to allow a moment's breath, Jasyn pleads:

"You need to bring her back."

The doctor's gaze lingers on Atalanta's face. "This is the archer? The one who aimed at the Ice King?"

Are the doctor's slightly quirked eyebrows a sign of... what? Disbelief? Being impressed?

"Whatever you just did to me, to Tiphys, you need to do it again." Jasyn's desperation must be clear from an entire galaxy away.

Doctor Orpheus tenses. It could be the time limit of the jaws of death, the realisation that Jasyn won't be moved, or that the doctor possesses empathy in the tool kit of her emotions, but whatever it is, she slinks her Medician case off her back and pulls out her V-iolin.

"Time is obviously of the essence, but I need to manage your expectations," says Doctor Orpheus, placing the headphones about Atalanta's ears and adjusting the dials on the face of the instrument. "The treatment doesn't always take. You have both been lucky." There's a strange bitterness to her words.

Tiphys hazards from behind a precarious pile of bodies and, in direct contrast to everything Jasyn knows about him, doesn't question or quibble. He watches in rapt silence, holding up his stick-ice torch for them to see by.

The V-iolin.

Jasyn wants to know what this strange device is: how it healed her, whether its origins are in science or magic. But more than understanding the mechanics, she wants Atalanta back.

“What are you waiting for?” she fights the urge to shout at Doctor Orpheus and to know what she’s rooting about for in her case.

“I don’t tell you how to shoot ice from your fucking fingertips, do I?”

Fair point. Jasyn retreats. It would appear in the realm of fuses, the doctor’s is short.

“This process cannot be rushed, or it’ll be for nothing.” Doctor Orpheus produces a pair of tweezers, spraying them with something from her cuff. “I need to remove the cause, or my efforts won’t stand a chance...”

Jasyn’s terrified gaze flits to the deadly gateway up ahead.

Neither will we if you don’t hurry up.

The doctor unceremoniously rolls Atalanta onto her front.

Be gentle with her. Jasyn gravitates to Atalanta’s side.

“...So, if you could please back the fuck off and let me get on with it,” continues Doctor Orpheus, “I would be grateful.”

Jasyn doesn’t know whether to be offended or impressed that in her tantrum, the doctor’s concentration remains fixed on the task at hand.

Adjusting the Tiphys-held stick-ice torch so she can better see, the doctor slices through Atalanta’s material layers, unveiling the three bullet perforations dotted about her spine. The worst of constellations.

Her hands move at such speed, Jasyn doesn’t even see her reach for the knife, nor put it away. Her fingers trace around the wounds, as if assessing them for useful information. When the tweezers return to the doctor’s hand, it’s time for the offending objects to be removed.

A juddering conveyor belt piled high with disease vectors is hardly the ideal location for surgical precision. And yet, the doctor’s hands hover above Atalanta’s skin; when the cilia sways, nudging Atalanta forward, Doctor Orpheus moves too. Jasyn has never seen someone so in tune with the vibrations of their surroundings.

As the tweezers lower to Atalanta's back, Jasyn's breath is tugged from her. When one bullet after another is removed, caked dark red, her own body lurches at the strange and unsettling sight of Atalanta wounded but unflinching.

"She can't feel it," says Doctor Orpheus.

It's unclear whether the statement is factual or intended to comfort. Well-intentioned lies, perhaps. Jasyn has only too recently experienced the nightmare pain of the blade being removed from her own chest.

Once all three bullets are out, the doctor wastes no time in reclaiming the V-iolin and dragging the bow across strings.

Jasyn expects to hear some sort of sounds, but the instrument is eerily silent. Whatever music there is must funnel through the wires and headphones.

While Doctor Orpheus closes her eyes in concentration, Jasyn grasps Atalanta's cold hand and attempts to encourage warmth and her return to life. When the doctor ceases to play and Atalanta remains ashen-faced and still, Jasyn's panic is as loud within her mind as the music is silent.

"It should have taken by now." Doctor Orpheus scowls as she adjusts the headphones over Atalanta's ears. "I'm sorry."

The taunting teeth of the mechanical nightmare grind all the louder.

"No." Jasyn drags Atalanta's body back along the conveyor to afford them more time. "Won't they stop the machines, if they know there are living people in here?" she asks, desperately.

"I don't think you quite understand. Everything is automated. It's more of a 'once you're in, you're in' type of scenario," Doctor Orpheus replies, checking and re-checking her Medician apparatus. "It could be the vibrations of the machine interrupting..." She mumbles to herself.

"Keep trying," Jasyn pleads, before she lets loose Atalanta's hand. Propelled by the need to try something that might help, Jasyn climbs over bodies, making her way towards

the jaws of death. The contraption bites with such force, the conveyor shudders, knocking her off her feet.

As the conveyor-tongue reels her in, her focus flits across the whole mechanical nightmare, seeking out any weakness. She'd hoped to find exposed components that she might disassemble, or something to jam into place, grinding the contraption to a halt.

But there's nothing. Whoever built this knew a thing or two about sleek design, but hadn't considered – or didn't care – what might happen should someone get trapped.

Getting too close to the teeth, Jasyn stumbles back, toppling the body-stacks. Human remains tumble, anchoring her in the unrelenting scroll towards death.

Terror squeezes about her chest.

A tremor of frozen air bursts from her, the epicentre of an explosion.

Crystalline formations crust across and through lifeless body parts, forming sudden stalactites and stalagmites at all angles, leaking into the mechanical moving parts of the machine.

Its innards clogged, the machine judders to a stop.

Jasyn seconds its gasp with her own.

The ominous creaks of the metal suggest they don't have long.

To buy as much time as possible, Jasyn places her palm to the trail of ice and wills a thicker layer into existence. None materialise, and she curses the ill timing of her retreating ability.

She clambers back to Atalanta's side.

Judging from Doctor Orpheus's furrowed brow, the return to life is not going as hoped. A hiss has them all turning to witness the blast of vapour jetting from either side of the mechanical jaws, instantly melting the iced obstruction.

Of course, with Iolcian temperatures being what they are, a design feature that tackles deep freeze makes sense. Whoever designed this might not have thought of an escape hatch for the damned, but they'd planned for the inclement weather.

Their interlude was only ever temporary.

With a creaking judder that would make even the most scientifically minded believe a mythical creature had emerged from the depths, the conveyor is on the move. Frozen carcasses crunch as the machine takes them.

Doctor Orpheus's focus remains on her patient and her instrument, checking and double-checking each calibration.

"If it was going to work, it would have by now," she says.

Jasyn's heart and mind race. Everything aches. Her chest threatens to split open and return her to death right then and there, but she pushes aside the pain and panic to find the spark of an idea.

"The headphones are for hearing the music?" she asks, feeling almost a fool for not having understood it all sooner. "Hearing the music. That's how this works?"

Tiphys moves the stick-ice torch between her and the doctor.

"If you think there's time for me to explain to you the intricate workings of—" begins the doctor.

Jasyn grabs the headphones. "She needs her Transonics."

Doctor Orpheus tenses, but before she can protest, Jasyn turns Atalanta's face to display the veined rock-like formations behind her ears. "She had them switched off at The Games. The crowd noise was too much."

Jasyn slides her thumb over each, igniting them into audibility and returning the headphones to where they had been.

With the hourglass of their luck almost out, Doctor Orpheus slices bow across strings.

The matt black surface of the V-iolin dances with flecks of gold.

Atalanta's punctured flesh, bullet wounds, shoulder damage and all, rebuild so suddenly – knitting in a clothes-scorching, poker hot glow – her connection to the land of the living materialises as her back arches, lifting her as she gasps back to life in Jasyn's arms.

GONE

Pushing hair from Atalanta's startled eyes, it warms Jasyn to witness the panic dissipating at the sight of her. Atalanta grasps the back of Jasyn's neck, staring as if she cannot believe she's real. As if there's no such thing as a world beyond them, no chaos on the horizon, as if time itself is standing still, Jasyn and Atalanta lean closer, only to be yanked apart.

"*Kèpfos-Euryproktos-Bdelyròs*. Do you have any idea how unsanitary kissing is right now?" Doctor Orpheus demands. "I've just brought you back from the dead. Do you think we could minimise the death potential from bacterial infections, at least for a little while? *Fuck*. You are surrounded by corpses. You were only just corpses yourselves. Don't put your mouth on *anything*."

The overwhelming shudder of the perpetual grind amplifies as the jaws of death decimate corpses metres in front of them.

That's a crash back to reality if ever there was one.

With no time to ease Atalanta back into the land of the living, Jasyn tugs her to her feet and assists her in lumbering over the unwelcome terrain, led by the blue glow of the stick-ice torch.

"What are you doing?" she asks as Doctor Orpheus rifles through her Medician case, selects a range of ingredients and mixes them in a flask, all while quickstepping around the bodies.

Watching in admiration, Tiphys holds out the stick-ice for her to see by. His expression seems to ignore their current circumstance of being stood on a moving path scrolling towards another death.

Finally, Jasyn and Atalanta reach the end of the line. The far end of the teathed tunnel features a floor to ceiling hatch, and no discernible way to open it. If the gnashing mechanisms are the output, this hatch appears to be the input.

A clunk-clunk-scrape—

The hatch is opening from the other side.

The stick-ice throws the material emblazoned with SOS into sharp relief. Neither Jasyn nor Atalanta have a moment to process what's going on before a cage door slides open and a tidal wave of bloodied bodies collapses out.

They sidestep enough of the carcasses to not be crushed, but the new arrivals form a floor to ceiling blockade. Walking the treadmill to avoid the furnace-fangs is no longer a viable strategy.

The fear in Atalanta's eyes asks, *What is happening?*

The engine roar emanating from the cage beyond the hatch is unwelcome and familiar and etched into Jasyn's mind: the military trucks that demolished their village. Or similar vehicles, at least.

Her stomach knots.

"This is where the trucks go?"

That this is where the hatch in the city square leads, chills her to the bone and beyond. This is where her parents ended up? The stomach-churning idea obliterates Jasyn's sense of justice.

The question of *Why?* is shoved aside. Her parents must already be through the jaws of death. She rejects this as readily as her stomach contents. As the bile settles in her throat, she reasons: "They could still be here, somewhere."

A new wave of nausea unbalances her. The last thing she wants is to dig through corpses, but if there's a chance of

finding her parents, she'd dig through a universe of graves.

The giant hatch slides closed.

At one end of the chamber, the crushing gateway of teeth. At the opposite end, mechanical *whirrs* precede the shoving of the body pile further into the tunnel. Two walls venturing ever crushingly closer.

Doctor Orpheus swoops to grab her like a snow-hawk snatches a vole-rat, startling Jasyn into motion. The unforgiving landing over a mound of bodies and into a trench of the same does little to encourage calm.

Jasyn pivots in panic, only to dial it down when she finds Atalanta is still at her side. Doctor Orpheus must have clawed her here, too. The stick-ice blue blip of Tiphys completes their line.

Doctor Orpheus checks the timepiece at her wrist.

Unwillingly but necessarily, Jasyn turns over one poor soul after another. The quantity is such that even after a dozen overturned cadavers, they start to seem faceless.

Jasyn's remaining stomach contents rebel at the corpse that actually is without a face.

"What are you doing?" Doctor Orpheus doesn't look up from her on-the-go science project. Nor does she inject anything other than annoyance into her words.

"If they're still here, you could bring them back." Jasyn unearths a putrid pile of new possibilities, sending a billow of rancid air into unwilling nostrils.

"Who?" Doctor Orpheus coughs at the stench, surprisingly not immune to basic human reactions.

"My parents... The military took them..."

Doctor Orpheus furrows her brow into something that might resemble sympathy, if she didn't look so angry.

"We were gone. And you brought us back," says Jasyn.

"If they're the reason you came to the Ice City, if they were deceased en route, or on arrival, they've been gone too

long for anything I could do for them. I am sorry for your loss—” The doctor shakes the concoction and hurls the bottle towards where the conveyor meets the tunnel edge. Before Jasyn can protest, she calls: “Cover your ears.”

Tiphys clamps his hands over his ears, but, bewildered, Jasyn and Atalanta don’t manage the same in time for the almighty boom which splatters rubble and body parts into the air. The human slop cast in front of them toys with the bile already in Jasyn’s throat. The crack of the explosion has her eardrums rebelling at a high pitch.

With the bulging eyes of a woman made wild, Atalanta’s every extremity curls. She buckles, her Transonics still amplifying the sounds of their surroundings. Enveloping Atalanta in her arms, Jasyn seeks the devices and thumb-swipes them into submission.

“Magic!” says Tiphys, more focused on the poof of smoke.

“There’s no such thing as magic,” scolds the doctor.

“Seems like magic to me,” Tiphys mumbles.

Jasyn holds Atalanta steady as her whole body quakes, subsiding in tremors. Doctor Orpheus observes, either with medical intrigue, or morbid curiosity.

Atalanta reaches out to Jasyn. She must have heard what the doctor had said, because her eyes tell Jasyn *I’m sorry*. Jasyn wants to reject that there’s anything to be sorry about. Her parents are here somewhere and the strange doctor, Medician, *whatever*, will bring them back.

Against all better judgement, she continues her search.

“This way, quickly,” says Doctor Orpheus, as she gathers up her case and V-iolin and crawls over human remains to their impromptu exit.

Tiphys follows like a doe-eyed puppy, but Jasyn and Atalanta remain on the conveyor belt towards doom.

“Even if you could find them, they would be too far gone.” The doctor’s voice contains a note of empathy, but only the one. “Come on. Now.” She grasps Jasyn by the collar, with

panic masquerading as insistence. “None of us are going to change this world or any other for the better if we’re dead, are we?”

S.O.S.

“Most people don’t fight me to the death about being saved,” Doctor Orpheus grumble-laugh. It’s not clear whether she’s amused or annoyed as they each scramble over the rubble of the wall, and out into the dust-filled corridor.

Jasyn exchanges a glance with Atalanta; Atalanta nods that she’s okay as she exercises her shoulder and its returned mobility.

“If this is the way out, how did you get in?” asks Jasyn.

“I played dead.” Doctor Orpheus’s flat tone suggests this should have been obvious. Her whisper, careful prowling and grimace let them all know they’re not out of harm’s way yet, and to please be *fucking quiet*.

While the doctor listens to their new surroundings, Jasyn observes the confusion of grey-brick and ice-blocks that form the unlit corridor’s walls. The relative silence, blemished by the machine’s grinding in the adjacent tunnel, indicate this corridor is mercifully unoccupied.

Doctor Orpheus waves for them to follow.

They’re heading in the same direction as next door’s conveyor. The grinding and churning of the neighbouring tunnel turns her stomach.

“All these bodies. All those people. Don’t citizens know what’s in here?” She fully expects to be told to shut up, except in more colourful terms, but as the doctor pauses to consider whether to turn left or carry on straight, she says:

“A real crook robs you in broad daylight and convinces you they’re doing you a favour. Do something in plain sight and without shame, people assume you have nothing to hide.”

An unwelcome lightbulb sparks to life. At The Games Tiphys had said something about ‘sanitation soldiers’. Is that what SOS stands for? *Soldiers of Sanitation*? Did the military think they really were dealing with a contagion?

It doesn’t make sense. Why bring the bodies back to the city?

Jasyn is about to ask what the point of all this grim reaping is, when they reach the end of the passage and the series of internal windows perforating the length of the hall, overlooking the conveyor-tunnel’s output. Each landscape rectangle, utilitarian rather than for display, has a crank-handle and Jasyn can only assume these access hatches are for solving blockages.

The notion of human parts being a blockage to be solved minces Jasyn’s own insides. The last remaining bile threatens exit as her mind processes what her body already understands:

Beyond the anvils of teeth, flames blast the broken body parts...

A funnel leads to blades. Beyond the blades, a series of processes are hidden by blasts of blue flame, bursts of steam and flourishes of dry ice. What emerges at the final viewing hatch is a row of jelly-like grey-pink squares, stacked high for distribution.

“We haven’t got time for a tour.” Doctor Orpheus grabs Jasyn by the elbow and marches her on.

“The rations at The Games?” *This is what they’re made of?*

What is wrong with this world? If people aren’t freezing to death, they’re starving. If they’re not starving, they’re eating their own. This is where Jasyn’s parents and the villagers ended up? It’s too much to take in, which is likely why her stomach contents are intent on being *out*.

“Gross,” says morbidly curious Tiphys, regarding the final viewing hatch.

“Square meals for the masses,” the doctor explains. “I’m told SOS stands for *Source of Sustenance*. Bloody nightmare. Talk about amplifying disease pathways.”

“Do people know?” begins Jasyn. “Do they know what they’re consuming?”

“Would it be worse one way or the other?” asks the doctor. Perhaps it’s good the question sounds rhetorical, because Jasyn can’t answer.

“To my knowledge, only those in the upper echelons know,” says the doctor, Medician, *whatever*. “They must. Someone has to coordinate the” – she pauses to find the best or worst word – “process.”

Doctor Orpheus gestures for them all to be silent and to follow her. Around the next corner, sharp shadows haunt the end of the passage: a cavalry of armed guards. It won’t be long until the distance is closed, and they’re discovered.

“If everything is automated, why are there guards?” whispers Jasyn to the doctor who bristles at her proximity.

“Blowing a hole in a wall tends to attract attention.”

Jasyn opens her mouth to ask a multitude of follow-up questions, but Doctor Orpheus shuffles pieces of *something* into her hand from an inner gown pocket. She gives them each two of the dark pebble-like items.

“Put these in your ears,” she instructs as she retrieves her V-iolin from its case.

“What even is that thing?” Jasyn wonders.

“A story for another time,” says Doctor Orpheus. “Now block your ears or you’ll find out first-hand what else this relic can do.”

Jasyn and Tiphys do as they’re told. The pebbles expand within Jasyn’s ear canals, resulting in a strange, waterlogged sensation. Pure silence isn’t something she’s ever experienced before. It’s... disconcerting, like listening to the waves on the shoreline of her mind.

Rather than put the pebbles in her ears, Atalanta checks her Transonics are switched off.

Keeping a keen eye on the approaching shadows, the doctor shows no sign of panic as she takes centre stage in the middle of the passage. As if playing to an invisible audience, she places bow to strings.

Gold ripples across the black surface of the instrument, the bow gliding through chord combinations, thickening the air where the haze of music drifts along the corridor.

Jasyn might not be able to hear the music, but she can sure *see* it.

As the five guards turn the corner, the tendrils of sound reach out and embrace their ears. Instead of raising their truncheons or tensing fingers against triggers, they slump to the floor, or remain standing, swaying, destined to fall.

Doctor Orpheus waves Jasyn, Atalanta and Tiphys to follow her.

As they pass the assault course of fallen and swaying guards, the rise and falls of chests and the occasional snorting snore suggests they're not dead but merely sleeping. *Wow*.

After rounding another two corners, a doorway is within sight.

A guard unknowingly stands between them and their escape, absorbed by her Entertainment-Shard, her ears plugged with hearing buds. From her occasional half-punches and twitches, it doesn't take much imagination to assume she's watching a replay of The Games.

At least she's enjoying herself.

Doctor Orpheus nods for Jasyn, Atalanta and Tiphys to retreat. Their motion must reflect in the guard's screen, because at the gesture she turns, reaching for her ice-pistol.

Jasyn leads the way back through fallen guards threatening to stir at any moment. Any hope of not being pursued by the lone guard, or worse, is undercut by the cold blue warning light flaring along the corridors. The blaring alarms must be

loud, but they don't pierce the plugs in her ears, nor wake the guards at their feet.

The solitary guard takes in her fallen colleagues with widened eyes and shaking hands. *How is she to know they're merely sleeping?*

With a backdrop of blue lights punctuating the escalating danger, Doctor Orpheus repeatedly inspects the timepiece at her wrist as she hunts the ground for... *something*. For a moment, it looks like she's lost the plot, but – *aha!* – she's found it.

With a dexterous twist, she turns a key-loop, but the metal disc of a floor hatch refuses to open.

A sudden spark signals an ice-bullet clipping past them.

The guard hazards through the assault course of her unresponsive colleagues. She's shouting something, probably telling the trespassers to get on the ground or drop their weapons, even though she surely can't see any weapon other than a musical instrument.

The guard's gun jams and she sets about remedying it. Her grasp of the radio at her lapel suggests reinforcements are already on their way.

The light from Tiphys's stick-ice torch tremors in his hand.

Doctor Orpheus offers an air-thickening note or two, but it fails to cut through the alarms, let alone the Entertainment-Shard plugging the guard's ears.

Instinctively, Jasyn steps forward and holds up her hands in a show of peace, but the guard is too focused on fixing her gun to notice.

"We're not here to hurt you," Jasyn calls, but the blare of the alarms must be too strong.

Doctor Orpheus cranks open her case and her nimble fingers file through the various vials. She selects one, but she isn't quick enough.

The guard raises her ice-pellet gun.

Jasyn steals the stick-ice torch from Tiphys's shaking hand.

Her muscles contract.

Cold snaps through her veins.

Air crystallises at her fingertips.

Stick-ice edges bloom to sharpness.

Understanding passes between Jasyn and Atalanta, and just as the guard's finger threatens to squeeze the trigger, Atalanta claims the formation and casts it at the guard.

Her powerful throw is as accurate as her arrow aim. The impromptu, multi-directional dagger pierces the guard's trigger hand and anchors her to the wall, enticing a startled cry, judging by her dropped jaw and widened eyes.

Tiphys doesn't disguise his open-mouthed awe or horror. Neither do Jasyn and Atalanta. Even Doctor Orpheus manages a raised eyebrow of *Yikes... but that's not the worst thing you could have done*, as she adds another couple of ingredients to her mix, possibly mumbling to herself as she goes.

Atalanta claims a stick-ice torch from the ground by the doctor's feet. She passes it to Jasyn with a look that says *Just in case*.

With her free hand, the guard reaches for her radio. But – *thwack!* – Jasyn and Atalanta's combined efforts begrudgingly but necessarily anchor her other hand. Like an animal caught in a trap, the guard kicks and her face contorts. Jasyn frowns, her actions heavy as a rock in her stomach.

Doctor Orpheus casts a spherical vial, smashing it against the wall above the guard's head. The liquid within drizzles over her face, calming her to silence.

The doctor wedges a second vial, different in quantity and appearance, into what might be a keyhole in the floor hatch. Knowing the drill by now, Jasyn, Atalanta and Tiphys race away from ground zero.

When the doctor remains in place, the trio hesitate. When she mocks them with a raised eyebrow, and the concoction

merely puffs a spark, they return in time for her to heave the hatch open.

A sudden stench. *Yuck*. Sewer access.

But there's no time to be picky as marching boots shudder the corridor.

Scaling the ladder into a subterranean tunnel simultaneously takes moments and several lifetimes. Legs won't respond fast enough as all four of them crush onto the ladder, one after the other, and Doctor Orpheus closes the hatch.

When the doctor steps on Jasyn's knuckles, Jasyn recoils with a hiss. The doctor slips and it's either through luck or reflexes that Jasyn manages to press against the falling doctor enough to hold her in place.

Her fingertips throb, but that the doctor's face is a mere breath away from her own is far more uncomfortable. Thank goodness for the medi-mask, or they'd practically be kissing.

The doctor's expression is unreadable, and then made irrelevant when shadows loom above and she signals for everyone to *be still*.

Doctor Orpheus angles to listen.

Jasyn removes the blockade from her ears, careful not to drop the doctor in the process. The items constrict, returning to pebble-size.

The marching feet of back-up guards thunder across the hatch. The smoke from the tiny detonation must have dissipated quickly enough so as not to give them away. Once the boots have passed, the escapees breathe their relief, and Doctor Orpheus gives the nod to continue their descent.

Jasyn waits awkwardly in place while the doctor makes quick work of climbing down her and the ladder.

When they drop from the ladder to the putrid part-frozen sewer waters, the sparkle in Atalanta's eyes invites Jasyn into her arms, before she punches her on the bicep and instructs her in no uncertain terms:

“Don’t die again, okay?”

The moment is cut short by Doctor Orpheus heading into the darkness with their one remaining torch.

TUNNELS

Trudging through the network of caves that compose the bowels of the city, they each cover their nostrils and, where possible, refrain from touching anything. The blue glow of the stick-ice torch lights their way along foul tunnels that are only marginally tall enough to stand in, mostly by merit of having a soft sewage ground layer to sink into.

Grime grasps at every step, sucking at ankles and chilling from skin down to bone. If they hadn't moments ago been lumped into a graveyard tunnel of decaying bodies, this tunnel would rank up there as the most disgusting place Jasyn has ever been.

As it is, it's a close second.

To push the stink from her mind, she asks one of her many burning questions:

"I thought life was meant to flash before your eyes when you die?"

"You discover it's possible to return from death and you focus on how it's been misrepresented to you?" says Doctor Orpheus. Jasyn doesn't catch her next few words, muffled by the medi-mask. It doesn't take much to imagine they might be curse words. Jasyn may get her wish to expand her vocabulary of swear words after all.

She's one breath away from asking why the doctor bothered saving her if she dislikes her so much, but the doctor continues: "There's more than one way to die. Which you'll discover if you don't hurry up."

“Where are we going?”

“You ask a lot of questions, don’t you?” It’s not the first time Jasyn has been accused of this. “Slow down, Tiger. You can’t learn everything in one go.”

Jasyn scowls. It doesn’t seem right to be patronised by someone only a few sun-orbits her senior.

The doctor clears her throat, stiffens.

“Sound travels in these tunnels. From now on, only make sounds that rodents make.”

That’s one way to tell Jasyn to shut up. It hadn’t occurred to her that anything would choose to live down here. Then again, who would choose to struggle away their days in Iolcus City, either? The rodents that waded through the grime likely don’t do it through an abundance of choice.

Still, if they could stay away from her, Jasyn would appreciate it.

When they emerge from a gutter hatch, Doctor Orpheus kills the stick-ice light. The relief and appreciation of fresh air is necessarily silent, but palpable. Doctor Orpheus even removes her medi-mask to take in a few gulps.

Taking their first above ground steps into the gated compound, draped in the darkness of the dual-moonlit night, it takes a moment for eyes to adjust. The closed gateway is familiar. The words ATHENA ENTERPRISES leave them with no doubt as to where they are – only now they’re on the other side of the gateway. Though, just barely. Being at the base of the wall, Jasyn feels like an ice-chip at the foot of an iceberg. Lookout towers flank the oversized gates. A pair of guards occupy each, thankfully focused in the direction of the city square.

Jasyn, Atalanta and Tiphys wait anxiously in the shadows for the doctor’s wisdom as she surreptitiously assesses the Athena compound.

Doctor Orpheus checks her timepiece cuff.

Jasyn should be inspecting her immediate surroundings, deciphering the shapes in the shadows, but something has her looking the other way. The fortress wall is an amalgamation of metal, mortar, brick and ice. As with anything in Iolcus, the ice is what both rips it apart and glues it together.

There's a gap in the mortar at eye level: an opportunity not to be missed. She peers through it to find it frames the city square, at this hour devoid of citizens, no doubt in preparation for the upcoming onslaught of hail. Even if Gus hadn't mentioned it to be a nightly occurrence, the sharp bite to the air tells her a storm is not far off.

The emptiness of the square is not what captures Jasyn's interest, however. It's the glowering statue of the Ice King with his ice-staff timepiece ticking away, punctuating each passing moment. Something is ticking inside her, in her gut, her chest, her thoughts. It's a promise:

One day, your time will be up...

She's not sure when. She's not sure how. Hail knows she's already shown she's not the one to do it, but she will *somehow* make sure he is removed from the throne. This desperate world deserves that at the very least.

As her eyes adjust, motifs of black take shape against a wall of white behind the statue. The high contrast piece of graffiti depicts a cape-wearing woman brandishing a sword, her likeness not dissimilar to Jasyn. The sword appears to be splaying out a shockwave of lightning or ice, or both, heading for the Ice King statue. Is it arrogant for Jasyn to think this has something to do with her? Or is it dim-witted to think it doesn't? The artistic license of the depiction suggests Jasyn won the battle.

That Jasyn has the olfactory mix of sewer and decay lodged in her nostrils would suggest this depiction to be misleading. That someone would take the time to create this, no less in the highly visible city square, intrigues and encourages her. That the Ice King won't be happy about such an open disregard for his power tugs a smile to the corner of her mouth.

A grinding of metal chains snaps her from her thoughts. Spotlights flicker on, pooling cool light across the compound. Doctor Orpheus hurries them to a shadow-filled nook as the gateway opens and demolition trucks grumble in.

As the vehicles pass under sporadic spotlights, Jasyn judges the overspill of cargo to be mostly buckled metal. Noting the dark marks which could be blood, she wonders whether the materials were taken freely or prised from their owners' grasp.

Has yet another village been choked in the Ice King's grasp?

An angry ice-spark tremors from Jasyn's palm as she thinks about the lives that have likely been stolen for this treasure. The drive to know what it's all for revs within her. Her fingers twitch, cooled by the ice-air hazing around them.

The brief glare Doctor Orpheus throws her as they press into the shadows, instructs Jasyn to *please* not attract any attention. She balls her fists and breathes out a plume of frozen air, expelling her rage as best she can.

Following the trail of spotlights, the vehicles roar into the vast warehouse. As the door mechanisms grind, starting to close, the spotlights flicker off.

Doctor Orpheus waves the trio to follow as they race to get into the warehouse before the doors close. Once in, under the cover of darkness, Doctor Orpheus guides them towards a wall. With practiced precision, she turns a hidden latch, popping the panel open.

A hidden door.

At a crashing crunch Jasyn swings around. The stolen materials are in the process of being deposited into a mound of scrap. The materials stack so chaotically high, Jasyn is put in mind of her father's stories of treasure hunters travelling the galaxies, collecting objects for no other reason than to accrue more and more wealth.

"Jasyn. This way," Doctor Orpheus hisses, as she leads them into the narrow corridor of rigid design. Blue, luminous

rectangles, like a dotted line, mark the way.

Likely sensing the questions buzzing in Jasyn's mind – *Where are we? Why are we here? Why did you save us? Who are you? Where did you get that instrument? Can we trust you?* – Doctor Orpheus places a *Shh!* finger to her own lips.

It's not clear whether it's objectively necessary, or if the doctor only wants some peace, but the trio do as they are told.

Nostrils flare at the stench clinging to all of them. Jasyn ups her pace in an attempt to outrun it, only to find the aroma of death with a top note of sewer keeping pace.

Doctor Orpheus leads them through a hatch into a chamber so white Jasyn has to block her eyes to adjust. The conveyor belt beneath their feet brings back too-recent memories.

Jasyn instinctively reaches for Atalanta's hand.

"Brace yourselves." Before Doctor Orpheus's words are even out, a uniform selection of holes in the wall light up and blast out a pummelling spray.

Jasyn and Atalanta squirm against it, until they note Doctor Orpheus, arms open, welcoming the haze, with Tiphys in her shadow, equally unfazed.

"Have you never seen soap and water? Thought we could all do with a dose, or several. Don't want our stench to draw unwanted attention." Doctor Orpheus... so condescending... *Why couldn't they be rescued by someone... nice?*

The doctor scrubs her face with the soapy water-mist.

The odd luminous markings on her black gowns and gloves, that Jasyn is only noticing now, wash away under the soap and water. It could be Jasyn's imagination, or that she doesn't know the woman, but now they're all clean, the doctor's shoulders and brow have relaxed.

Mechanical *whirring* accompanies the opening of a floor to ceiling hatch. A clattering crunch, and a truck upturns its haul of scrap onto the moving conveyor belt. This must be where they clean the stolen materials. But for what purpose?

Jasyn isn't sure how she feels, being hosed down like a hunk of scrap metal, but the freshness, clinical rather than comforting, is far better than the stench of sewer-death.

The further along the corridor the conveyor carries them, the cleaner they become, but the more sodden their clothes. *How are they meant to sneak through a city of ice like this?* Either they leave a water trail, or they'll freeze to death as soon as the frigid air hits them. And Jasyn's had about enough of dying for one day.

In answer to her silent question, the corridor ceases to mist them with water and instead blasts them with air. It's not exactly warm, but it is powerful, and effective. Much like the doctor.

"This way," instructs Doctor Orpheus once they're dry, leading them to another seamless hatch and into a service tunnel.

From there, they climb inbuilt metal ladders, shuffle along one vaguely blue-lit tunnel and then another, winding their way up and along until a hatch leads them into a marginally brighter room of more formal design.

The slight increase in light does little to reduce the open hostility in the doctor's eyes. Nor does it rejuvenate her appearance, which is not unlike a ghost or an apparition from the land of the dead. Only now does Jasyn notice the swagger. Doctor Orpheus has the gait of someone who's fought her way through life enough to brawl out of any altercation. Jasyn makes a mental note not to annoy her any more than she already has. Though she's not sure how...

Blueprints and chiselled ice-sculptures of dozens of vehicles decorate the room. This must be where the rich and powerful source their vehicles. Designs on show include the military demolition trucks, though the sculptures give no clue as to their purpose. Other modes of transport include the bi-ice-cycle and various incarnations of wagons.

"Why are we here?" Jasyn turns for answers and the mystery is short-lived as a door, the proper kind with a visible

handle and everything, opens and out steps Gus. She and the doctor share a nod.

“Chief,” says Doctor Orpheus as a greeting.

Another familiar face arrives. “Bloody hail. How are you two even...” Peleus nudges past Gus and Tiphys to choke Jasyn and Atalanta with an unexpected hug. He is a full three seconds into the embrace when it dawns on him that hugging is not what they do. Awkward rigidity takes over as he retreats.

“Sorry.” His cheeks turn a blistering red. “I thought you were dead.”

“Well, technically...” begins Jasyn, but decides against falling down that vole-rat burrow.

Peleus’s hands, neck and face are hatched with cuts and bruises and an array of dressings. His clothes are clean, however, and not dissimilar to Gus’s.

“Peleus. Looks like *you*’ve been to death and back,” signs Atalanta and Jasyn repeats.

Peleus tugs his collar and cuffs to try to cover his bandages. “When you died in the arena, I guess I got a bit knife-wieldy over the situation. Not the wisest move, in hindsight.”

“He turned up on my doorstep. And now we’re here,” says Gus in a manner that unmistakably means *that’s enough talking*.

They all turn to her.

“I’m certain you have a thousand questions,” says Gus.

And that’s not an invitation Jasyn can refuse.

ATHENA ENTERPRISES

“**W**hy didn’t you tell us the truth?” asks Jasyn, trying and failing to keep her anger from her voice.

Gus knew they were looking for the military trucks. She knew they needed to get beyond the mysterious hatch into the government facility. If she had something to do with rescuing them from there, she must know what goes on behind closed doors.

Jasyn’s palms haze. She squeezes her fists to melt the crusting ice, hoping no one will notice, but the doctor’s observant stare lets her know she’s not getting away with it. And yet, apart from watching her – either fascinated or bored, Jasyn can’t tell – the doctor does nothing.

“Like I said at dinner, I don’t know you,” replies Gus.

“Then why rescue us? I can’t imagine this is all some elaborate way for you to say, ‘I told you so’?”

“You’re welcome.” Doctor Orpheus crosses her arms in a *fuck you* kind of way. Either on her behalf, or Gus’s.

“It wouldn’t help to point out the obvious, would it?” says Gus, smoothing her cerulean-grey starched collar. “That I told you I would help. That roaming the city would be dangerous. That, for your sake... for the sake of my family, I asked you to stay put. Instead, you went to The Games. You crashed and burned in the most catastrophic way. Would gloating help–?”

Gus smooths her overalls.

“Forgive me,” she says, more to Doctor Orpheus than the rest of them. “I am fiercely angry.” Doctor Orpheus remains at her side, glaring at Jasyn for good measure.

“This is you fiercely angry?” says Peleus.

A creeping shame seeps into Jasyn’s gut. Gus extended a helping hand, only for them to take too much. But she snaps:

“If you’d told the truth—” She swallows her own anger. What would she have done if she’d known the truth? She wouldn’t have been calm and collected about it, that’s for sure. Perhaps Gus was right not to tell her... Perhaps there was no right way forward in the difficult position Jasyn put her in.

“In retrospect, we both could have acted differently. I didn’t know if I could trust you. I knew that for whatever...” Gus pauses, as if searching for the right word, “...*cargo* you saw entering that facility, it was too late. I didn’t know what you would do if I told you the worst news. In my world, upsetting someone with the power of Iolcian Ice is always the last thing you do.”

Jasyn can hardly disagree with that.

“But seeing you in the arena,” continues Gus, “seeing you put your life on the line for Tiphys – whether or not it was your fault he was there in the first place.” Again, *the shame*. “And attempting to stand up to the Ice King...” *Attempting* is one word for it. “I may not yet trust your instincts, but you’re brave. I’m aware we’ve gone a scenic route to get here, but I trust your intentions. And I believe we can help each other.”

Gus takes a breath. “You’re likely wondering what it is I do here.” Jasyn would be lying if she said she wasn’t curious, as Gus takes on a more ‘tour guide’ tone: “If you follow me, I’ll show you.”

And Doctor Orpheus said there’d be no time for a tour.

Gus leads them to a corridor flanked by ice-screens animated with images of astro-missions from across the decades.

Peleus shuffles along, indifferent.

Tiphys gazes in open-mouthed awe. His enthusiasm for the sky and everything associated with it is as clear on his glee-filled face as Jasyn's would be, if this world and recent events hadn't put her emotions through the figurative wringer.

Atalanta's hand brushes against Jasyn's, making her heart trill. It's a comfort that even with her mind a tangled web, her feelings for Atalanta are not only clear, but reciprocated. When their fingers mesh, Jasyn encounters the contact as powerfully as a full body embrace.

The intermittent overhead spotlights throw the silhouette of Doctor Orpheus across them, lingering a few paces behind like some sort of shadow-spirit. Her glower is unreadable. Is she grimacing at them holding hands? Or is that just her face? If she hadn't been responsible for their retrieval from death, Jasyn would be questioning whether the woman has it in for her.

"All of this" – Gus gestures to the general surroundings before aiming her focus at Jasyn – "was for them in the beginning. Your bio-parents wanted to explore the worlds out there, to discover answers to questions we haven't even thought of yet. It was their spirit of adventure that opened the skies."

On the corridor walls, looped moving images depict astronauts waving to crowds before boarding their chrome-sparkling ships; stretching to shake the hands of citizens as if they are gods reaching from the skies; mighty and heroic, journeying into the unknown.

"Wait," says Jasyn, looking to Gus. "You're literally *a sky ship scientist*?"

With a curt smile, Gus nods, as if she hasn't figured out how to respond to a question that suggests admiration. Doctor Orpheus smirks.

"I design various vehicles," mumbles Gus as she leads them to the next corridor, sparking with captured images of constellations from outer space. Bursts of pinks, purples and blues vie for supremacy or alliance in an ever-changing

tapestry, and Jasyn can't help but reach out to try to touch the stars.

The inconsistent smattering of stars could fool anyone into thinking space itself was lost to a snowstorm. In amongst the storm, a dot of a white-blue planet: a lump of solitary hail in the undulating inky darkness. Its galactic neighbour bleeds out in a crown of sickly green. Iolcus and Corinth, side by side, for better or worse.

"Iolcus is dying," says Gus. Her strained jaw ticks. "It's already starting to rot. Death-grip of winter aside, the ground has become unproductive, wrung dry of nutrients. Produce is spoiling."

The hints of spoil on the crops Jasyn had grown in the village sprout into her thoughts. The husks of produce in the industrial icehouses beyond the city, abandoned, too.

"Scientists haven't been able to figure out the exact cause," says Gus. "Of course, it doesn't help that the Ice King kills anyone who tells him something he doesn't want to hear. Add to that his unwillingness to temper the use of Iolcian resources. Because, how else can he provide the latest technology, the best sky-rises, and remind the upper echelons how great life is when he's on the throne? He's exhausted what this world can provide. And, on top of that, he has us locked in a tomb of ice."

The venom with which strangers in the stadium demanded Jasyn's death – *kill, kill, kill* – haunts her ears. "The Ice King blamed me for the eternal winter," she says. "The audience, too."

"That the ice infection is more pronounced in the Ice City and its surroundings... well, it doesn't take a sky ship scientist to figure out you're not the cause."

Jasyn's shoulders loosen at Gus's words. Gus, at least, doesn't blame her.

"Tall tales and rumours of disease, having people blame you and your bio-mother, it's served him well."

“If you’re an Ice King on a stolen throne,” says Doctor Orpheus, matter-of-factly, “you might well fear the child with a power over Iolcian Ice who could grow up to overthrow you.”

Jasyn waits for some cutting remark about her sky-splitting, unspooling, misguided and ultimately fruitless arena antics, but there’s none.

“What he’ll do now everyone thinks you’re dead,” adds Gus, (“*almost everyone*,” Doctor Orpheus corrects), “well... that’ll be interesting, won’t it?”

At the swipe of Gus’s palm, doors open, and she ushers them into a glass-fronted viewing chamber.

Jasyn’s getting the impression that clarity regarding the statement *we can help each other* is destined for the scenic route, too. But she’s willing to risk trust on the people who hoisted them from death, so she joins Gus.

Like the cube-lift contraption in Gus’s tower, the walls are as clear as a giant ice-cube. Not letting herself be outwitted a second time, Jasyn latches onto a wall-rail, bracing for the downward or upward movement.

The cube-lift allows a hawk-eye view across the Athena warehouse.

An organised tangle of hydraulic-driven mechanised arms pulls apart an assortment of metals mixed with countless other materials. Spider-like contraptions break the stolen items into components, to be siphoned off into the next stage of the process. Broken edges, blasted dents, deep scratches, scrapes and other blemishes all add up to the fact that these resources have been reclaimed without consent.

“This is what our village was destroyed for?” The anger rises in Jasyn so suddenly, the ice-cube’s inner surface frosts. Her volume skyrockets as she invades Gus’s orbit: “To be melted down for your *vehicles*?”

Doctor Orpheus steps in with a hearty shove to Jasyn’s chest in the universal gesture of *back the fuck off*.

The cube-lift is starting to feel smaller.

“If you think the Chief has any say in the matter, you’re boasting your ignorance.” Doctor Orpheus’s voice scalds like dry ice. Her challenging stare has a bite, too.

With a palm to the doctor’s shoulder, Gus lets her know to stand down.

“You think if we tried to prevent it, we’d be rewarded with anything other than death?” Doctor Orpheus’s tone warns Jasyn not to overstep. “You tried standing up to the Ice King. Look how well that turned out.”

The stomach drops from Jasyn’s world as the cube hurtles left, smacking her into the left cheek of Doctor Orpheus, who recoils with a withering grimace. If her words hadn’t put Jasyn in her place, that look does the trick.

The doctor plucks a vial of clear liquid from her cuff and, with the nozzle, sprays the cheek Jasyn had been pressed against. Jasyn can only assume it’s some sort of disinfectant.

Rude.

Getting to grips with the momentum, with Atalanta’s assistance, Jasyn stands upright, eyes flitting back and forth as the blur of the epic production line streams past.

Or, rather, they stream past it.

Doctor Orpheus and Tiphys lean against the railing, cool as icicles in winter. Gus is more rigid, but clearly used to the momentum.

“I understand your anger,” says Gus. “But this city, this world, is not as it should be. You’re welcome to judge me, but I assure you, you cannot do so as harshly as I judge myself. I’ve gone against the blueprints of my morality. To survive. For my family to survive.”

The production line a mere blur beyond the cube, Jasyn squeezes her fist tight in an effort to melt the layer of ice clinging to her palm. Atalanta steps to her side, taking her hand and melting it with her warmth. With the slightest nod, she suggests, *Let’s hear what they have to say.*

Jasyn nods, a silent agreement to simmer down.

“What do you know of Corinth?” asks Gus.

“The planet and people are poison,” interrupts Peleus, his chest puffing.

“*Pankataratos*. The Ice King has you parroting a moon is a planet.” Doctor Orpheus bristles. She sighs with gravity, more to the heavens than Peleus.

“They’re stealing our light. Or will be, soon.” Peleus continues his losing battle.

“The place and people are far from poison,” says Gus. “Corinth does get marginally more sunlight, not by stealing it, but by being closer to the source. Corinth is more prolific with crops. Resources aren’t endless, but there’s enough to go around.”

“Not having an ice-wielding overlord sapping it dry helps,” says Doctor Orpheus.

“The doctor and her family are from Corinth,” explains Gus.

Having been subjected to Doctor Orpheus’s charm, Jasyn is tempted to make a comment about *poison* and personality, but something in the doctor’s vague, unmoving frown (sad, rather than grumpy) makes her think better of it.

Peleus clears his throat, his face as green as the haze of Corinth. It could be the momentum, or discomfort at the conversation.

“No matter what the Ice King’s glacier-house reels will have you believe,” continues Gus, “the *moon* Corinth isn’t on course to steal our light. It isn’t going to turn day to night and bring world-ending ice. It’s an excuse.”

Jasyn is about to ask, *An excuse for what?* when the sideways motion of the lift slows and stops. She braces for a sudden new direction. Instead, Gus retrieves a handkerchief from her pocket and wipes a clear patch in the frost and condensation covered window.

Jasyn tries not to be embarrassed. *Just a little girl who can’t control her ice*. The Ice King’s words ring in her ears, but

the warehouse snags her attention.

It's both impressive and daunting, depending on how the facts are considered. Lined up in a rigid grid formation, part-composed sky ships await the newly formed component parts emerging from the production line. The parts are claimed automatically, robotically, and pieced into place. That the vehicles here seem to be receiving their last puzzle pieces, makes this the *end of the line*. There's nothing timid about the sky ships, the gargantuan space fleet, kitted out with weapons designed for destruction.

Tightening her jaw against emotion, Gus explains, "My vehicles of discovery turned to machines of war."

[C]ARGO

“**T**he Ice King is doing what he’s always done.” Gus’s jaw and voice strain. “He sees something he wants, he invents a way to get away with it. Convincing this world that Corinth is on course to steal Iolcian light makes an attack a necessary evil at worst, or righteous justice at best.”

“Hail,” is all Jasyn can think to say.

“Hail, indeed,” agrees the doctor. “As with most conflicts, it’s all about resources and power. Those with the resources have the power.”

“It’s all automated?” signs Atalanta with a scowl and gesture to the production line. Jasyn repeats her words, reflecting back to the citizens chosen by lottery, keen to get through the gates to work in exchange for food.

Discomfort scrawls across Gus’s face and Jasyn’s mind unwillingly catches up to the gut-clenching answer:

“They don’t get paid in rations. They become them?” Jasyn’s whisper is one of disbelief.

“Rations?” asks Peleus, and Jasyn can’t even think how to tell him the origin of his arena snack.

“Don’t people notice when workers never return?” asks Jasyn, trying to keep what little bile she has left quarantined to her stomach.

“The official line is that those who get through the gates work here until they’re sent to work in the ice mines,” says Gus. “The ore there is said to block communication signals, so

it's generally accepted that those who work won't be in contact. Another neat fabrication."

The eerie emptiness of the ice mine they'd encountered en route whispers through Jasyn's thoughts like a dying breeze.

"But the mines are" – she struggles for the right word – "dead."

"Payment is food for the worker, and for their family who stays behind," says Gus. "People tend not to fact check when their needs are met."

Jasyn's thoughts turn from the horrors of Iolcus to the horrors that await Corinth. "Does Corinth know? Has anyone told them what the Ice King plans?"

"Communication with Corinth is a challenge," says Doctor Orpheus. "But even if it weren't, knowing would only result in precious resources being repurposed for war. If we find the solution to Iolcian ills, if we remove the Ice King from the throne in the process, there'll be no need to tell Corinth, because there'll be no attack."

Jasyn's eyes widen. *Find the solution? Remove the Ice King?* Where does she sign up?

"I don't know much about sky fleets," signs Atalanta, and Jasyn repeats, "but it looks formidable. And, you said yourself," she gestures to Gus, "he's a one-man army. Why doesn't he attack now?"

Jasyn elbows the renewed condensation to gain a better look.

"Corinth is peaceful, but not without military might," says Doctor Orpheus. "We have exceptional defences. The Ice King seems to be of the opinion that stripping Iolcus of resources for his battle fleet will pay off. He knows he'll only have one shot. A shot that, if we're successful, will never be taken."

"The fleet will be ready within two Iolcian sun-orbits," says Gus. "That's our time limit. We need to return before then."

“Return?” asks Jasyn, half a nano-second before the ground drops, her senses flooding with the panic of falling as the cube-lift plummets into the depths.

Tiphys’s elevation is accompanied by wide-eyed wonder and is short-lived as the doctor grasps him by the collar and tethers him, keeping him safe in a rough sort of way. Gus and the doctor radiate a cool calmness stemming from being firmly latched onto the safety railing.

Her mind racing, her insides stretching and contracting in nauseating uncertainty, Jasyn regains her balance just as Atalanta does. They anchor themselves to the railing, while Peleus flails. Jasyn grasps him by the forearm and guides his hand to the rail. He obviously decides a series of mumbling curse words are an appropriate response.

Catching their breaths, Jasyn, Atalanta and Peleus offer the kind of co-ordinated glare in Gus and the doctor’s direction that suggests an ‘us vs them’ battle of epic proportions, rather than an overly eventful ride in a cube-lift.

Tiphys looks between them, giggling.

“Sorry about that.” Gus barely hides her smile.

And maybe Jasyn deserves it.

The cube slows to a grinding stop.

Legs shaking, Jasyn moves to disembark, but Doctor Orpheus, with a smirk (*of course*), tugs her sleeve as if to say *you’re not getting away that easily*. With the swipe of Gus’s palm over the lift-sensor, a mechanical crunch and shudder shunts the cube in a manner that puts Jasyn in mind of derailing but must – she hopes – be moving from one set of tracks to another. The chamber might be see-through, but what surrounds them is indecipherable darkness, reflecting the doctor’s knowing smirk from too many directions.

That stupid smirk–

Jasyn gets a front row view of said smirk as – *gaaaaaaah*, the cube hurtles in a new direction, pressing her cheek practically against the doctor’s mouth. The doctor recoils and retrieves her disinfectant vial.

Urgh. Why do their faces keep almost or *actually* meeting? *The universe has a terrible sense of humour.* Even Atalanta laughs a little. Though neither Jasyn nor the doctor are finding this funny.

Jasyn settles against the railing, holding so tight her muscles might lock. Though the darkness makes direction and distance difficult to discern, along the new tracks the cube manoeuvres along and down, forward and up, in a dizzying fashion, soaring through the network of tunnels with little regard for the comfort of its occupants.

“We’ve had to be creative with location, to ensure we’re not found,” explains Gus.

Jasyn would ask an entire universe of questions, but she’s busy remembering how to breathe, hold on for dear life and not faceplant into the doctor’s face again.

The cube-lift twists through the dark, along undulating horizontal and vertical axes. Leftover adrenaline has Jasyn buzzing, and she can still imagine expelling her stomach contents, but beneath the choppy seas of her frazzled nerves lies calm. Closing her eyes, she might be fooled into thinking she’s flying, if her fingers weren’t numb from gripping.

The cube slows and Jasyn opens her eyes to be welcomed with the doctor’s grimace that states, rather than questions, *What the fuck are you doing?*

Beyond the cube is a blur cloaked in darkness. They could be anywhere.

“Our solution will take a journey,” says Gus as she swipes the cube doors open.

There are no windows. No natural light. Their breaths cloud in heavy puffs and Jasyn imagines they must be far underground. Another swipe of Gus’s palm and a series of spotlights whirr into action at increasing heights, drizzling light all the way up six stories to unveil the towering hunk of sky ship squeezed into the chamber only marginally taller than the lump of blemished chrome itself.

Jasyn is the first to step out, somehow managing not to trip on her own jaw. The excitement almost vibrates out of her as her eyes wash over the dented ship.

“Standard CARGO ship,” Tiphys informs them, filing through the information stored for quick reference in his own brain. “Equipped with basic evasive technology, logic and statistical diagnostics, standard defences; and D-0-VE, ‘dove’, life rafts. Cargo nets as light as a feather, strong as an ox.”

“Very good, Tiphys.” Gus smiles at the boy, who beams.

The ship’s shape is such that it could be a bird paused in mid-upward-flight. A scaffold braces around its body, looking more like a support to stop it from falling apart than a ladder from which to make improvements.

“This is your solution?” asks Jasyn, gravitating closer to the colossal structure while Atalanta hangs back.

“This is the ‘how’, not the ‘what’,” says Gus.

“And the ‘what’ would be...?” Peleus crosses his arms, waiting to be unimpressed.

Jasyn’s thoughts flit to everything Tiphys over-shared in the Dead Woods, and to mysterious Medea who lead them through the ice-labyrinth. Medea who visits her in dreams and death. *I bring light where there is darkness. Water where there is desert. Warmth where there is cold. I am the Cure you seek.*

Jasyn covers her mouth to hide her laugh – not sure if it stems from awe, disbelief or the thrill of possibility – as she says:

“You’re searching for the Golden Fleece.”

SKY MAP

Gus and Doctor Orpheus exchange a questioning look, a mix of *Who told her?* and *Well, that saves us a speech*. They find their answer to the former in blushing Tiphys.

Doctor Orpheus clips him about the ear. “What part of ‘secret’ do you not understand? Is there anyone you haven’t told?”

“The kid was telling the truth? About being an astronaut?” Peleus sounds more annoyed than impressed. “The Fleece is just a story...” He scoffs.

“True. The Fleece became myth. A children’s story,” says Doctor Orpheus. “But it has its roots in reality. In science. A science we don’t know, yet”

“You have evidence the Fleece is real?” signs Atalanta, and Jasyn repeats.

“After he took the throne by force,” says Gus, “Lias... The Ice King... started to fear the heavens would be his undoing, that astronauts would return with something that would knock him from the throne. The last skyward ship promised a path to the Fleece. That’s why he closed the skies.”

“It’s thanks to Tiphys this journey is even possible,” says Doctor Orpheus.

With a nod from the doctor, Tiphys takes his cue and slots a shimmering, translucent coin into the disc of a pendant tied about his neck with string. With the press of his thumb, angled in a manner that suggests it does have to be *his* thumb, light

beams from it in a galaxy of uncountable stars, a hailstorm frozen in time.

Even Peleus can't help but stare agape.

"A Sky Map." Her sense of wonder reignited, Jasyn reaches out to the stars, wading through the image with water-like ripples. If the wagon's navigation system was *fascinating* and *so vintage*, the galaxy taking shape around them is, well, positively *space age*.

"Before my father left aboard the Saviour, he gave me a copy of his route." Tiphys twists his palms, left and right, up and down and around, as if conducting the image to a silent tune. He wades into the projection where a line denotes a mapped route in amongst the stars, and gestures within the image, pulling at the line like a rope, hurtling the mapped projection forward through the galaxy and onto the next. Following the thread he must have traced a thousand times, Tiphys commands the heavens.

Galactic swirls scroll past. Ink blot galaxies, nebulae, lone stars and spheres of all dispositions fly by as they traverse impossible distances to reach the territory light on notations.

The edge of the known universe.

"The Elysian Expanse is uncharted," explains Tiphys, "but if we follow my father's route, we'll find the way."

A pulsing point within the map that suggests the destination. It's not a planet, more a jumble of coordinates with ELYSIAN EXPANSE written in brackets.

"Doesn't bode well for mission success, does it?" Peleus, ever one to underscore a losing battle. "That the previous voyage got lost, or worse, following its own map."

Before Tiphys can see red, the doctor lays a placating palm on his shoulder.

"Without this map, searching for the Fleece would be like looking for an ice cube in an ice bucket, frozen inside a glacier on a planet made of ice," says the gruff doctor and Jasyn can't help but raise an eyebrow at her over-the-top analogy. *Does she think Iolcians only understand analogies made of ice?*

“And if it’s not there?” asks Jasyn.

“We use our heads,” says the doctor. “This map should get us close enough, then we follow the trail of breadcrumbs.”

Talk about mixing metaphors... Jasyn’s not sure whether she’s cold or hungry.

“If even one element of the Fleece’s power turns out to be true,” continues the doctor, “our journey will be worth it.”

Jasyn isn’t sure whether she’s been told off or given a brief but rousing battle speech.

Imagine. The real Golden Fleece. Iolcus replenished. A planet that wants for nothing. It’s an intoxicating idea. Jasyn should know; even her dreams have been imbued by the magic of the skies. The melodious voice embraces Jasyn’s thoughts: I bring light where there is darkness. Water where there is desert. Warmth where there is none. I am the Cure you seek. I am Guardian of the Golden Fleece.

“There’s a difference between wanting something to be true and it being so,” signs Atalanta and Jasyn, snapping out of her reverie, repeats. “Stories aside, do you know what the Fleece does, or how it works?”

“You’re right to be sceptical.” Gus steps in, likely assuming Doctor Orpheus is one utterance away from busting a blood vessel. “True miracles are by design. We have verbal and written accounts of the Fleece’s effects, some more reliable than others. The most widespread account is of the Fleece enabling crops to grow in impossible conditions.”

Impossible conditions. Those sound like the conditions they’re working in.

“Figuring out exactly how it works will only be possible once it’s in our possession,” adds Gus.

Drawn in by the dull ship metal, wondering whether it needs a good polish or scrapping altogether, Jasyn tugs at her own sleeve and attempts to shine the surface. Beneath the grime, it gleams silver.

“I’d wager a planet with a cure for all ills won’t want to give up the source,” says Peleus.

“Absolutely right,” says Gus. “What monsters would we be, taking something that has not been freely given?”

No better than the Ice King himself.

“From the information we have, there’s a strong suggestion that the Fleece is organic in nature,” says Doctor Orpheus. “There’s a possibility it can be grown or duplicated.”

“It’s a long way to go on a possibility,” Atalanta signs and Jasyn repeats.

“Is there a right distance to travel to save lives?” The question from Doctor Orpheus is without sarcasm, dripping disdain or any other negative tone Jasyn already knows her capable of. “What distance would you go to save those you care about?”

The emotion in the doctor’s distant eyes entices Jasyn to reach out and tell her she understands, but as quickly as Iolcian weather changes, the doctor fights the tide of her emotions and returns to her default setting of *defiant-meets-pissed-off*.

The creaks within the ship bring to mind a rope bridge threatening to snap.

“Why not use a battleship from the fleet you’re building?” asks Jasyn.

“They’re not designed for intergalactic travel. They’re intended only to reach Corinth.” Gus hangs her head in sadness or shame.

Jasyn scratches her head as her gaze travels up the questionable vehicle.

Seriously? This ship?

Shadows shift behind a porthole and Jasyn’s eyes flit back to find nothing there. Had she imagined it?

“Take to the skies? Perish in the skies more like,” signs Atalanta. It’s clear from her ‘crash’ gesture what she’s getting

at, and – in perfect timing – a piece of ship falls off with an almighty *chunk*.

“Just so we’re as clear as airless ice...” Peleus begins. “Even if the Fleece is real. Even if, somehow, this dilapidated tin can makes it across galaxies and you, even more *somehow*, find the Fleece *and* conquer the return journey, how does any of that stop the Ice King?”

“What better to combat an Ice King who’s freezing a planet to death than a technology that brings life?” says Gus.

“Yes, but... won’t he claim it for himself?” says Peleus. “Resources and power. He’ll take the resource so he has the power.”

Gus exchanges a look with the doctor. “That is where you come in,” she tells Jasyn. “You might not be able to use your – talents–” (*was that sarcasm or monotone?*) “–in the same way yet, but with practice and Doctor Orpheus’s scientific insight, you will...”

“Scientific insight?” Jasyn’s not sure she likes the sound of anything to do with Doctor Orpheus.

“Like many infections, the Ice King cannot be gotten rid of easily,” says Doctor Orpheus, in a manner that suggests the dirt beneath her nails is far more interesting than explaining anything to Jasyn. “Iolcian Ice. The science behind it is little understood. By understanding how it works – how *you* work – we’ll better understand the Ice King’s power and find ways to loosen his grip on this world.”

“You’re saying you want to poke and prod me to find out how I work?” Jasyn raises an eyebrow. *Oh hail*, has the eyebrow made her question suggestive? She was aiming for medical...

The doctor almost smirks, but buries it.

“Less of the poking and prodding, but yes, that’s about the shape of it. If we can’t solve the problem of the Ice King directly, the scenic route will have to do.” If Doctor Orpheus were in any danger of letting Jasyn feel wanted, she doesn’t let

the idea linger. “Besides, a lot of Iolcians want you dead. The skies might be the best place for you.”

“I think what Doctor Orpheus is trying to say, is *Will you join us?*” says Gus.

The question, as life-changing and universe altering ones often do, hangs between them, like a bulging star system in Tiphys’s navigational sky map.

Squaring up to the ship, she runs her hand above the metal as though the ship were a wild beast to be tamed. The bevels and furrows of the CARGO paintwork not unlike the contours of a map, Jasyn scratches away the tattered remainder of the peeling C to form its new name: ARGO.

The possibilities aglow in her mind burn as bright as filament fruits. To make this world a better place... To save Corinth in the process... To figure out her own abilities... To not have to hide... To explore the magic and mysteries of the skies...

Isn't that the kind of journey it'd be foolish to decline?

REST

Though she looks shaken and queasy, brow furrowed in thought, Atalanta unwinds her crossed arms to sign to Jasyn: “The grumpy doctor is right. With the Ice King’s vendetta against you, and the whole of Iolcus now knowing your face, the skies might be the safest place.”

If Atalanta agrees, Jasyn would be doubly foolish not to go.

“Does the lost heir get all the fun, or are we invited too?” asks Peleus.

“I thought only fools take to the skies?” says Jasyn.

“I never said I wasn’t foolish.” Peleus smiles a nervous half-smile.

“It’s a small crew,” says Gus. “Everyone on board has to pull their weight.”

Jasyn looks to Atalanta, hoping to find enthusiasm, but Atalanta’s cheeks have paled. She looks like she wants to run a thousand miles from this hunk of metal. No-one else seems to have picked up on this, because Gus adds:

“The captain will have the last word on the matter. The four of you need to stay here until the ship is ready. I’m sure I don’t need to explain that you can’t show your faces in Iolcus. Three of you are meant to be dead.”

Jasyn expects Peleus to fuss about being kept inside. Of all of them, he’s the only one who hasn’t been killed by the Ice

King *and* he has citizenship. Instead, as if the world has inverted, Peleus responds with:

“Under the radar. Got it.”

“How long will the repairs take?” asks Jasyn.

“This ship hasn’t been to the skies in over a decade,” says Gus. “I need to make sure there aren’t cobwebs and rodents clogging the pipes.” *Was that a joke?* “The damage is cosmetic. Mostly. The only answer I can give you is: as soon as safely possible. I would rather spend time ensuring we’re fit for flight and have an uneventful and successful journey, than... well, the alternative. Rushing would be an unfortunate and false economy.”

“There are over forty steps in the take-off procedure,” interrupts Tiphys. “Each one has to go right in order to take flight. A single blockage or piston misfire can rip the hull in—”

Atalanta’s not the only ashen-faced one now.

“Yes. Thank you, Tiphys.” Gus grimace-smiles. “Once I’ve made all the necessary repairs, and we have a ship mechanic we can trust, it’ll be time to depart.”

“You’re not part of the crew?” asks Jasyn, surprised.

Gus adjusts her cuffs. “I’ll be ‘ear to the ground’ on Iolcus.”

Jasyn nods. If Gus’s role in a renegade sky voyage were discovered, no doubt her family would suffer the consequences. There’s unease in the woman’s eyes, so Jasyn doesn’t press the issue. Instead, she suggests:

“Put us to work. If we can help speed up the process...” She looks to Atalanta and Peleus and they both nod. Though Atalanta’s nod is less enthusiastic and more *ground please swallow me now*.

Gus nods thanks.

“You three—” says Doctor Orpheus, indicating everyone apart from Peleus. “The return journey from death takes its toll on the mind and body. Drink fluids. Eat something. Get plenty of rest. Or you’ll feel the effects. You’ll find food in the galley

supplies.” She gestures to a selection of crates marked GALLEY at the edge of the chamber, ready to be carted aboard. “Do *not* eat more than one ration pack each every six hours. We don’t want to exhaust resources before even leaving the planet.”

“We’re supposed to sleep here? On the floor?” *Ah, that sounds more like Peleus.* “Aren’t there sleeping quarters on the ship?”

“With all due respect,” says Gus, “letting you loose on my ship, unsupervised, doesn’t sound wise to me.”

It sounds like *due respect* is rather little. Jasyn mentally crosses her arms, before reminding herself that they went against the one request Gus had. Like this ship, lost trust will need some epic scaffolding to rebuild.

“Make yourselves comfortable,” says Gus, heading for the cube-lift. “I’ll be back tomorrow to continue with repairs.”

“Here,” says Doctor Orpheus as she pulls a bundle from the depths of her Medician case and thrusts it at Jasyn. The colours are immediately familiar. Her cape. A little ragged, but smelling of detergent rather than death. “I washed it when we were on the conveyor.”

Jasyn’s thumb traces the dull silver and flecked gold clasp. The tree of flames, oft the symbol of the story, the myth of the Fleece. *A relic from the real world or a myth-inspired decoration?*

“It has a chunk missing,” adds the doctor with a shrug.

Sure enough, the bottom third is truncated by a rip, which makes for a sorry cape, but Jasyn’s glad to have it anyway. She’s about to express something along the lines of *thank you*, but the doctor is too busy with about turning and joining Gus in the cube-lift.

The soft fabric between her fingers has Jasyn thinking of her parents, the village, of Algid and Squall.

“Wait,” she calls.

Gus presses something in the cube-lift. Whatever it is it keeps the doors open. Doctor Orpheus rolls her eyes unsubtly.

“Gus. Thank you—” Jasyn begins, “—for taking us in.” Gus nods, as if she can sense there’s more to this *one more thing before you go* exchange. “I’m aware I’m in no position to ask for anything, but is it possible... Algid and Squall, my horses... They’ve roamed free most of their lives. Is there a way to get them out of the city?”

“My family and I will see to it they find safety.” Gus nods, and Jasyn trusts her.

With a swipe of Gus’s palm, the doors shut in tandem with the main lights dimming to a cool blue hum, leaving the four of them in the oddly lit cavern of ridiculous proportions. Barely a second passes before Peleus heads for the galley supplies, passing by metal barrels labelled with warnings.

“What are those?” asks Peleus.

“Fuel canisters for the ice-furnace,” says Tiphys in a *that’s obvious, you idiot* tone.

Space and limited living quarters aren’t known for calming tensions. The idea of listening to their squabbles for the duration of the voyage, along with the buzz of blue light is giving Jasyn a headache.

While Peleus shuffles through tins and ration pouches, assessing his culinary options, Jasyn retreats under the canopy of the ship base, where the pressure in her head can get some peace.

The gravity of her exhaustion buckles her.

Atalanta offers a pouch of melted ice and a ration pack with a depiction of beans and mushrooms on the front.

“Doctor’s orders,” she signs.

A swig of water and Jasyn feels more human. Upending the ration pack, her mouth captures a few lumps of supposed food. Her taste buds appear to be figuring out what Atalanta’s face is already showing. *Yuck*. Either the cuisine is bland

beyond belief with a strange, sour aftertaste, or Jasyn's taste buds are playing tricks.

"Maybe it's one of the side effects," says Jasyn, trying not to imagine an entire voyage sustained by food that makes her wish she couldn't taste anything.

"Still better than recent alternatives," signs Atalanta.

Hail, Jasyn hates this planet and can't wait to leave it. Gazing in the upward direction of their hopeful salvation, she wonders what discoveries, adventures, trials and triumphs lie ahead. With enough imagination and squinting, the metal of the underside of the ship, dulled and nicked, could almost be a smudged galaxy of stars.

They'd journeyed to the Ice City to save a village and find answers. They failed to save anyone, lost their lives in the process, and found only partial answers and a thousand more questions. Soon they'll catapult into the stars to save a planet and a moon and answer the question: *how is an Ice King removed from the throne?* Hopefully, with much more success.

"What's your problem?" asks Peleus, between licks of his now-empty ration pack. His question is aimed at a sighing Tiphys, who can't seem to get comfortable on his makeshift mattress of grease covered rags.

"I just... I don't get it," says Tiphys. "In the arena. It was a perfect sleight of hand. How anyone saw me take the key..."

"I guess instant action replay has its uses," says Peleus.

"Even so. It doesn't make sense... I just... can't stop thinking about..." He barely finishes his sentence before drifting off to sleep.

Jasyn wants to ask why Atalanta is unsettled. Why she's burying her anxiety. Is it the idea of being trapped in a metal tower, with no escape, or is it the journey itself? Out of the two of them, Atalanta is the one who knows the skies. Shouldn't it feel like going home? Though, a journey of this magnitude in such unfavourable conditions, perhaps Jasyn should question why she herself isn't unsettled.

Before she can shape her words and find answers, Atalanta's head lolls against her shoulder, heavy with sleep. Uncertain whether it's tiredness or her body recovering from a dose of death, Jasyn's entire body aches. Exhaustion looms over her like an iceberg, and it's not long before she has no choice but to let the undertow of slumber take her.

GALACTIC HALO

Fingertips claw into Jasyn's shoulder, hoisting her to wakefulness. Adrenaline on a knife edge, it takes only a moment to adjust to the various depths of shadows, and that there's nothing there that merits panic.

Which Atalanta also seems to be beginning to understand, as she catches her breath and ceases attempting to burrow into Jasyn's flesh. She bolts upright, gesturing an apology as she soaks the sheen from her forehead with her sleeve.

"Don't apologise," signs Jasyn, passing her the pouch of melted ice and instinctively dabbing at Atalanta's brow.

Chest and shoulders heaving back to calm, Atalanta closes her eyes. She swigs the offered water and, consciously or not, leans into Jasyn's touch.

"I guess returning from death has side effects of mild terror," signs Jasyn, trying to ignore what such heart-hammering proximity does to her, and that she's practically in Atalanta's lap.

When their eyes meet, Jasyn forgets to breathe. No mountain ledge rivals the vista in Atalanta's eyes, no skyscape comes close, and the warm galactic halo of her Transonics, suspended in the dark, has Jasyn orbiting her like a willing satellite.

"You want to talk about it?" asks Jasyn, taking a breath and pushing aside thoughts of attraction, but when Atalanta's gaze flickers between her eyes and mouth, it's clear Jasyn's not the only one with intimacies on her mind.

Atalanta's tongue traces along her lips, where ice-water lingers. *Heavens*, Jasyn's not sure she's seen anything as captivating in her whole life.

Atalanta reaches out, as if she might hold her at a distance, but instead takes firm grip of Jasyn's shirt and draws her in, kissing her so softly, so deeply, Jasyn's heart pulses with the burning brightness of a thousand filament fruits.

How is it possible for a kiss to contain so much? Passion and longing, affection and desire.

Electricity pulses the air.

With a stifled gasp, Jasyn glances somewhere beyond the cluster of supply crates at the opposite edge of the workshop, where Peleus and Tiphys sleep. *How does Atalanta do that?* How does she make her forget the rest of the world?

"They're fast asleep," signs Atalanta. "I can hear their heartbeats, their breathing." She smiles, her playful eyes drenched in desire, her palm spanning Jasyn's sternum, enticing her closer. "I can hear yours, too."

Mouths meet, tongues glide, senses soar.

Nestling closer, Atalanta positions Jasyn's fingertips on her lower tunic buttons in invitation, as she makes her own slow and purposeful progress from the top.

When did Jasyn's whole body become a heartbeat?

Each beat turns air into crystalline formation, bursts of snow-created stars taking their place in the galaxy of darkness around them. Jasyn might be able to keep quiet – *just* – but she's not sure how to keep a building ice constellation under wraps.

Atalanta either hasn't noticed, or she cares only for the stars in Jasyn's eyes as they peel the unbuttoned tunic over her shoulders. When Jasyn's lips place against hot skin, where injury had only recently blemished, Atalanta's hitched breath strokes Jasyn's ears and every other part of her.

Tracing skin with fingertips and gentle touch, together they discover recent injuries have healed and only old scars remain.

The memory of blood and bullets and the life jolted from Atalanta, buckles something in Jasyn. She breaks from their kiss, tightening arms around her, as if fearing one or both of them might collapse to nothing if she lets go.

I thought I lost you...

Thickened air shudders in a spiralled nebula, extending from the epicentre of their embrace. Forehead to forehead, Jasyn lets her tears fall, stifling her sobs. Neck, shoulder and chest muscles all protest their silence.

Atalanta's eyes search hers (the message in them: *You're okay. We're okay.*) as she thumbs away Jasyn's tears, kissing her cheeks in their wake, finding her mouth in a heated, salty kiss. Every nerve ending alight, the filament of Jasyn's heart roars to flame.

New constellations skitter into existence.

As their fingers entwine, as gentle lips nuzzle her neck, Jasyn bites her lip to keep her appreciation within. She falters only when Atalanta guides her hand to the most intimate part of her, and falters further when Atalanta's heavy, heated breaths tease her ear.

When Atalanta unravels the knot at Jasyn's trousers and slips her hand beneath thermals and shorts, Jasyn is challenged not to collapse in on herself like a dying star.

I never want to lose you again...

Jasyn's not sure if she whispers or imagines the words, as – slow and steady, as if they have all the time in the world – their contact simultaneously too much and not enough, the shadows pulse to their rhythm.

The air spins itself into clusters.

At the centre of their crystalline constellations, in the shared galactic halo of Atalanta's Transonics, they are the celestial bodies around which everything orbits.

Mouths meet, breaths tangle and fingers seek to sail skyward.

That they are still alive, given all that's happened, speaks to the strange workings of the universe. Jasyn could never have predicted they'd survive a dance with death. She could never have predicted their journey across Iolcus would bring them here.

Starburst galaxies expand in Atalanta's eyes as fingers dig into Jasyn's back in the most otherworldly way. And in this moment of inner unfurling and flight, as the arms of the ice-galaxy stretch out, they swallow each other's sounds and take each other to the stars.

SHADOWS IN THE DARK

A *thunk-thunk* startles Jasyn from sleep.

She doesn't know if it was in her mind or an actual sound. Was it something falling from, or within, the ship? The arrival of the cube-lift? Or only one of the others moving?

Atalanta no longer clings to her, but remains within arm's reach. According to the steady rise and fall of her shoulders, she's utterly undisturbed by Jasyn's jolt back to wakefulness. That seems unlike Atalanta, ordinarily so alert, even in rest. But they've all been through a lot, and the after-effects of death are not to be underestimated.

Unhooking her cape, careful not to wake Atalanta, Jasyn listens to her urge to stretch and tiptoes closer to the mounds that represent Peleus and Tiphys. They expand and contract in similar fashions. Everyone is asleep.

The jolt-worthy sounds could have been the ship. Perhaps they shouldn't have slept under the work in progress.

There's no obvious debris.

That leaves the cube-lift; as far as she's aware, it's the only entrance and exit to this place. The scaffold, crates, and what Jasyn can only think to call *giant ship feet* hide the lift from sight.

She stretches her arms, her neck, her shoulders as she approaches. They've only been in this chamber for – well, time is difficult to measure in the dark, but it can only have

been a few hours, surely... They haven't even taken to the skies and Jasyn is already feeling contained.

How strange that being kept safe can feel like prison. Certainly not a new concept in her life.

Only darkness occupies the beyond-glass cavity where the cube-lift would be, if it were here. So why does Jasyn have the hackle-raising sensation that there's someone or something in here with them?

She pauses.

Only sleeping breaths, buzzing lights and the strange creaks of metal – as if the ship itself were hazarding breaths – disturb the silence. With no obvious shapes emerging from the darkness, she observes the ill-lit ship. How did it even get into this chamber? The ceiling too high to discern its details, from the ground it looks like a cave, as if the sky ship had been built to its contours, or the cavern had organically formed around it.

It's more likely shadows playing tricks.

It trudges up the memory of the forbidden cave. The mountain bears. The cartilage of her ear stings at the recollection. The visceral clawed rip.

The cave's etchings take shape on the cavern wall, as if the markings were in front of her now: the tree made of fire, set against a backdrop of stars. The round disc of smooth metal, her cape clasp, lies on the material beside sleeping Atalanta, but its contours are fresh under her thumb, as if the item were in her palm.

Jasyn's not so far down the well of her own thoughts that she cannot decipher that these *apparitions* aren't real. It could be her exhaustion, or her recent visit to death, that has the divide between memory and the present feeling as ripped and leaking as when she'd received the paw-swipe to her ear.

It's strange. Of course it is. When she looks directly at them, she can't take in their details. It's like looking through a migraine. What is there is hazed, incomplete.

The question of why her thoughts have turned to this moment is a mystery, but she can take a guess. The danger of

the cave is little different from the danger of the skies. They are heading into the unknown, and their journey may turn them to dust and bone.

But it's not just that.

The sense of being watched, hunted even, occupies Jasyn's gut. *Clack-clack-clack-clack. Claws against rock.*

Jasyn turns to the sounds.

Paws larger than Jasyn's head. Teeth sharp as stalactites. Kaleidoscope eyes wisp into formation. All the parts that, in combination, form the creature towering improbably high behind the sky ship. At least with the unrealistic sizing, Jasyn can be certain this is an anxiety induced embellishment.

Never has she been so untrusting of her senses. And yet, never has she been more certain of a threat hiding in the darkness.

With the tried and tested method of clamping eyes shut and breathing deep, Jasyn reopens her eyes to find the memory overspill gone and only a patchwork of shadows in its place.

Just as she's convinced the apparitions have been banished from her mind, the darkness sews a new formation. This one more welcome. Silvering at the temples, and as confused by his surroundings as Jasyn is by his presence... A lump catches in Jasyn's throat.

Dad?

With arms outstretched, she rushes over to Chiron, only to paddle through his image as if he were ropes of separating smoke. She about turns. Is an after-effect of death seeing the dead? Or is an after-effect *thinking* you see the dead?

"You're not real," whispers Jasyn.

Of course he's not real.

"I'm not sure I have the answer to that," says Chiron, reforming. "This is all rather new to me." *It sounds like him...* "Snowdrop," he scolds, looking left. "Stop eating that."

Snowdrop is there, too? Jasyn follows her father's gaze but sees nothing.

"Can I see Mum, too?" asks Jasyn, her voice a strangled whisper. Even if it is a manifestation of her own wishful thinking, seeing her mother again would be something sent from the skies.

"Jasyn. Your mother isn't here," says Chiron, confused. "I thought she was with you."

Why would her subconscious add that detail?

"I haven't seen her since—" Chiron looks over his shoulder and, without ceremony or warning, the threads of his image unravel, leaving Jasyn in the tangle of her thoughts and at a loss for answers.

She steps forward, as if that might help, but her father's image – real or imagined – is gone. The darkness left in his place is thicker than that before it.

A melodious whisper invites Jasyn to turn.

In the sea of shadows, the flowing familiar gowns of Medea take shape. Her smiling eyes beckon Jasyn closer as her words return in a translated echo: "It is in motion. There is cause for celebration."

"You're not real," Jasyn whispers, almost to herself. "You're just a dream I don't understand."

Medea's words caress Jasyn's ears, overlapping with their own translation: "You do not understand and therefore I am not real? An arrogant and flawed logic. Follow the path to the Golden Land, Jasyn of Iolcus, and I will show you how real I am."

The suggestive tone has Jasyn inwardly squirming as much as it has her drifting closer to those amethyst eyes, like a misguided moth to a flame. Medea reaches out, and just as her fingertips are about to touch Jasyn's cheek, the waking dream effervesces to nothing.

A scuffling ratchets Jasyn's attention over her shoulder where a familiar silhouette confronts her.

Is this a trick of the light, another misfiring of synapses, or is the Gladiator Princess staring at her from the opposite end of the chamber?

Shadows obscure the view. Cargo crates and scaffold, too.

By the time Jasyn rounds the obstacles, ready for confrontation, the Gladiator Princess, apparition or not, is nowhere to be seen.

Before she can catch her breath, or tell her adrenaline to dial down, a *thunk-thunk* from the far side of the chamber interrupts. The question of real vs imagined remains lodged in her mind as she strides for the cube-lift.

There, a shadow lingers.

Adrenaline vibrating her limbs, Jasyn hedges her bets with reality and takes a running jump at the intruder in the dark.

SKY CAPTAIN

The sudden weightlessness on contact with the mysterious figure inspires no sense of having the upper hand. Which way is up and which is down is impossible to determine. That is, until Jasyn's back slams into the ground. Her own legs accordion into her midriff, and an *oof* exits her lungs as formidable bodyweight presses against her.

In the interests of good – or bad – timing, the chamber's main lights whirr into action, highlighting the familiar features crowding Jasyn's vision.

Her assailant releases her grip and slouches back on her heels.

Without her war paint and limited armour, and with her muscles hidden beneath climate-appropriate layers, she could be a stranger, but the blue-purple sweep of curls peeking out from under a wool cap and the grin that speaks of smugness and amusement (and not being threatened *at all* by Jasyn's attempted attack), is unmistakably, confidently, Herakles.

“Well, if it isn't the King-challenger herself? Risen from the dead.” Herakles's dimpled smile makes it impossible to tell whether she's making fun of Jasyn or not. Her quirked expression highlights the design of her captain stripes shaved not only into the sides of her hair, but her eyebrows too. “I guess you'll be answering the question: in a world made of ice, what use is someone who can make more of it?”

Jasyn opens her mouth to respond, but either she's winded, or the great gladiator's proximity has rendered her simple,

because all that emerges is a feeble gasp.

Mechanical whirrs accompany the cube-lift sliding along its track. Another *thunk-thunk* and another cube-lift arrives. Herakles casts a glance over her shoulder to observe as Gus and Doctor Orpheus step out. The former – for some reason – carries the fawn. The latter, dragging her gaze across Jasyn and Herakles in the grease-stained dirt, smirks.

“Don’t let us disturb you,” says Doctor Orpheus, as she drops her Medician bag at the edge of the chamber and gets comfortable on a crate.

Herakles springs to her feet with the kind of grace expected of an athlete and holds a helping hand out to Jasyn. When Jasyn accepts, she’s hoisted to her feet as if Herakles had expected she’d be heavier. She’d thought the gladiator would be taller, but Herakles has only a couple of inches on her.

Jasyn doesn’t want to talk to Doctor Orpheus, but she might explain what ‘after-effects of death’ entail, enabling her to figure out whether her deceased father’s words hold any sway over the real world. She opens her mouth to speak, but Gus beats her to it.

“You got here with no one seeing you?” she asks Herakles, as she places the bow-legged fawn onto the ground.

Without so much as acknowledging Jasyn’s attempted attack or apologising for waltzing into a dark room in the manner of a thief, Herakles turns to Gus and the doctor.

“Yes, Chief. Amazing what a bit of war paint removal and a hat can do,” says Herakles. “Though my absence will be noted if I’m gone for long.”

“I’m surprised you risked mussing your hair,” says Doctor Orpheus, dryly.

“Just because you want to muss my–” Herakles begins.

“*Heaven’s above.*” Gus cuts through the... argument? Banter? *Flirting*? “You’ve occupied the same space for under two minutes. Simmer down.”

Herakles's sly wink at the doctor prompts an eyeroll from its target and a grumble from Gus along the lines of *the dire state of things* when *the fate of Iolcus rests in their hands*.

"I'm not having *that* on my ship." Herakles crosses her arms at the fawn as if it had personally offended her with its spindly legs and trotting attempts.

Atalanta and Peleus gravitate to the site of activity. The fawn enthusiastically, if ungracefully, trots over to Atalanta.

Peleus's jaw drops.

"You're the gladiator Herakles," he states, offering an open mouth and nothing further. He must have short-circuited.

When Herakles notices Atalanta, the gladiator's demeanour changes. She's half *deer in headlamps* and half *melted edges*. She's probably never seen Transonics before. That must account for her stare, right? Not that Atalanta seems to notice, too focused on giving the fawn a behind-the-ear scratch.

The doctor's light scowl almost imperceptibly pings between Herakles and Atalanta, and Jasyn wonders what exactly she's observing.

"Turns out my husband is allergic," explains Gus with a nod to the fawn.

As Tiphys shuffles from the shadows, attempting to tame his mop of hair, Herakles lights up.

"I thought you were a goner," she says, marching over to him and folding him into a hug with a sneaky hair ruffle. Only now does Jasyn notice that Tiphys's haircut is a poor imitation of the gladiator's.

Tiphys pretends to be annoyed, but he can't help smiling.

Peleus scowls. He really needs to learn to hide his jealousy better. Or, better yet, not get jealous.

"Maybe next time you want to steal jewellery from an Ice Princess," says Herakles to Tiphys with a playful shove, "talk it through with me first?"

Tiphys blushes and nods.

Seriously? He knows a gladiator who could have helped and instead they went with the plan that literally killed them?

Jasyn bites her tongue.

“We thought you should meet the crew,” says Gus, in the general direction of Jasyn, Atalanta and Peleus. She tugs at her sleeves as if unaware of her anxious habit. “Herakles is our captain,” she continues, for any who hadn’t already figured it out. “She’ll be at the helm.”

Jasyn’s not sure what to make of that. Feral arena war cries would suggest she’s a little unhinged...

Another cube-lift whirrs its arrival. This one with the spritely gladiator duo, famously known as...

“Castor and Pollux,” says Peleus, as if he’s taken the role of announcing the bloody obvious.

The silver-haired athletes share knowing smiles, their teeth as perfect as their toned physiques. “Always good to meet a fan,” says Pollux. *Starstruck fans must be a regular occurrence.* “Captain,” he says with a nod of acknowledgement to Herakles.

Weren’t they being carted out of the arena the last time Jasyn saw them? Their current ease of movement would suggest the severity of their injuries was for dramatic effect. Or that Doctor Orpheus had a musical-hand in their recovery.

What’s more dramatic right now is the duo’s smiles morphing to frowns, specifically aimed at her. It’s enough to make her feel both insignificant and responsible for all the world’s atrocities.

“You can’t be serious?” Castor aims her question at Herakles. “An ice-monger aboard a sky ship? You really think that’s a good idea?”

“We all saw her performance in the arena,” adds Pollux. “Having a live wire in a tin can hurtling through oblivion—” He slicks his hair back as if imagining his words take shape. “She’s never even been off-planet,” he adds.

“There was a time when you were new to sky ship... stuff, too,” says Jasyn in her most diplomatic tone, wishing she’d managed to call it something other than *sky ship stuff*.

“We were never at risk of having a bad day,” (Castor’s tone is best described as *surlly*) “and ripping a hole in the hull and—” Her tirade pauses abruptly when her line of sight falls to Atalanta.

Jasyn can’t decipher what the vaguely stunned expressions on Castor and Pollux’s faces mean, nor why they both immediately look to Herakles.

“Your opinions have been noted,” says Herakles with an undertone of warning and an overtone that commands they get over it. To Jasyn’s surprise, neither Castor nor Pollux rebel.

“You’ve now met my trusted flight technicians,” says Herakles, gesturing to the two personifications of negative body language. *Is there anyone on this crew who doesn’t hate me?*

“First Mate,” interjects Castor. Is that for Jasyn’s benefit, or is she reminding Captain Herakles?

Herakles’s dimpled smile seems a little strained for a moment before she continues: “They’ll see that we sail as smoothly as possible.”

Annoyed by the prospect of being in a confined space with people who so openly despise her, the mechanical whirr of the cube-lift shifting along its track, making way for the next, hardly registers until:

Thunk-thunk. Mechanisms crank and the clear doors open.

ONE WAY

A flurry of activity precedes the outpouring of four more figures. The first is an unfamiliar but friendly face, hiding behind a barely tamed fringe and unruly stubble. His shy smile lights up as he sets sight on Herakles and the crew.

“Hylas here speaks every language under the suns,” Herakles informs her new recruits. “Any contact we make, he’ll bridge the gap.”

Hylas offers a friendly nod to Jasyn, Atalanta, and Peleus. For a man of supposedly many languages, he’s an oddly quiet sort. Perhaps that’s part of his charm. The power of words comes from knowing when and how best to use them. Hylas hasn’t said a thing and already Jasyn likes him.

“You have to be kidding?” Peleus grumbles as the next two crew make themselves known.

“Hello, sailors,” says the first wing-tattooed sword thief. Only now their tattoos are covered by jackets, sleeves stitched with astro-stripes. “For those of you who haven’t had the pleasure of knowing me, I’m Kalais,” says the one that, Jasyn is learning, is the more vocal of the two.

Gus quietly clears her throat. Looks like Kalais doesn’t only make Jasyn nervous. Kalais’s eyes seem to skip past Gus to give Herakles an acknowledging nod. There’s an atmosphere. *Why is there an atmosphere?* Undoubtedly one of Kalais’s talents.

“And this is my brother, Zetes,” adds Kalais, with a bump to his shoulder.

“I can introduce myself,” Zetes mumbles.

Peleus’s eyes bore into them, not knowing which one to address with the full force of his glare. “You’re sailing the skies for the greater good of Iolcus? Well, I’m sure there’s a use for your... services...”

“My brother and I are trained professionals,” says Kalais.

“I’ll bet...” Peleus offers an unsubtle, wolfish grin.

“Adjust your tone, sailor, or you’ll find yourself on a one-way trip out an airlock when you least expect it.” Now that Kalais is pointedly pressing against Peleus’s chest with her right arm, it’s clear that she has no digits, no hand. “We’re astro-engine technicians, you ignorant ground-hogger. At least, we used to be. We’re more in the liberating-goods-for-the-greater-good trade these days, as you may have noticed.”

Peleus’s focus flits to the wrist pressing his chest. The glint of a terrible idea enters his eyes. *No, don’t say it...* Jasyn preemptively cringes as he says:

“Yes. I see you’re *light on fingers*.”

The flare in Kalais’s jade eyes is so sudden, Jasyn’s put in mind of a clash of volatile chemicals. She has Peleus’s arm twisted behind his back so fast, his hand bent backwards, helpless, Jasyn can’t decide if she’s horrified or impressed.

Peleus, meanwhile, has the look of a boy who poked a viper’s nest. He looks to Herakles, as if to say, *Are you going to stand for this, captain?* and also *Help!*

Herakles shrugs. “You say stupid things, stupid things happen. I won’t be fighting your battles.”

Kalais lets his arm loose and it’s as though her temper never sky rocketed.

“Amazing how easy it is to lure idiots close enough to take what we want,” says Zetes. “You can have these back.” He casts Peleus’s purse pouch at him. The precious pebbles clatter within. “No need for them where we’re going.”

Kalais throws an axe not exactly *at* Peleus, but in his general direction. His hand lashes out and catches the flying

handle. It might have been impressive if not for his gloating grin.

“Hey there, Snowflake.” Kalais turns to Jasyn with a shrug. “Sorry the sword thing didn’t work out.”

Great, someone else whose tone she can’t read.

“Why’d you give it back?” asks Jasyn.

“Looked like you were going to die anyway, and I guess we wanted to see what you’ve got.”

“And?”

Kalais and Zetes exchange a grimace underlined by an “Uhhrrr” sound of disapproval.

Jasyn wishes she hadn’t asked.

A sneeze signals the next emerging crewperson from the cube-lift.

“Oh, these damned allergies,” says a chipper voice, as a goggle-eyed figure steps into the light, led by the *tap-tap-tap* of her cane.

“This is Lynk,” says Herakles. “You might know her as Iolcus’s meteorological forecaster, but—”

“You can call me Lynk,” says Lynk, as if Herakles hadn’t introduced her. “You might know me as Iolcus’s meteorological forecaster,” (Is Lynk repeating everything on purpose? She’s too smiley to be passive aggressive...) “but I’m a cosmic forecaster. I read the skies. Even those beyond the horizon.” Lynk turns her goggle-eyed grin on the new recruits. *What a ray of sunshine.* “Aided, of course, by certain technological advances.”

“And, as you all know,” Herakles says, “Tiphys is our navigator.”

“If she reads the skies, what use is a navigator?” asks Peleus, arms crossed, as if on a mission to undermine the boy at every opportunity.

“Without Tiphys and his map,” says Lynk, “I’d be more lost than a fallen star. I wouldn’t be able to tell you which way

to go.” Her frown suggests she’s actively imagining such an unwelcome circumstance.

“It’s my job to know the route,” says Tiphys.

“And mine is to foresee any obstacles in our path,” adds Lynk.

Peleus gives a non-committal “hmm.”

Herakles draws a deep breath and claps her hands. “Right. That’s us all caught up.” She points to Jasyn and Atalanta. “You’ll both be working the engines, on rotation, with Kalais and Zetes. They’ll get you up to speed.”

The entire room has turned towards Herakles, drawn to her ease of command or her commanding presence. Jasyn and Atalanta nod, while Jasyn struggles to read what Kalais and Zetes think.

“When you’re not in the engine room, you’ll be working with the chief engineer on ship repairs, and weaponry repairs and upkeep.”

“Weaponry. I thought this was a peaceful trip,” says Jasyn.

“We can be peaceful but prepared, can we not?”

“What about me?” asks Peleus, his tone yelling *don’t leave me behind*.

“You’ll be our in-flight sustenance co-ordinator,” says Herakles. When Peleus only looks puzzled, she explains, “You’ll be the chef on this bold adventure.”

Peleus tries to hide his disappointment.

“You’re a butcher’s boy, aren’t you? I assume you know a thing or two about preparing meals. Though the meals on offer are rather more plant based and the only things you’ll have to attack are tins and ration pouches. A crew travels on its stomach. Your job is important.”

Peleus stands a little taller at that.

Mechanical *whirrs*. The cube-lift slides aside, making way for the next.

“Who else are we expecting?” asks Castor, confused.

“Did you find a new engineer?” asks Kalais, scowling.

Herakles looks as grim as the moment she threw her arena battle.

Gus is already at the chamber edge, illuminating a block of old ice-cube monitors Jasyn hadn’t even known were there. The squares of light crackling across each cube-front depict different locations within Athena Enterprises. The images are too frazzled to decipher faces, but clear enough to show the corridors are swarming with soldiers. And, more pressingly, there are half a dozen soldiers packed into a cube-lift, armed and ready for battle.

“*Kriòmyxos*. How did they find us?” asks Doctor Orpheus of no one in particular.

The *whirr* and *clunks* behind the screen-glass of the docking bay strongly suggests the cube-lift is almost there.

Peleus tightens his grip on his axe-knives.

A switch flips in Herakles’s eyes. Emergency command mode. “Gus. Sort that cube.”

Gus swipes her wrist at the docking sensor and punches in numbers at an alarming rate. “They have control of their cube.” Her voice is more even than Jasyn would have expected.

“We need a blockade,” says Herakles and Gus wastes no time at the controls.

At Gus’s command, the previous lift reverses along its track, back into position. The lift before that does the same, shunting the lift backwards along the track. The next lift repeats, forming a queued backlog of cube-lifts to block the way.

Slam.

The first cube-lift in line shunts against the platform gateway, dominoed from the back of the line. The soldier-occupied cube-lift, the fourth in the queue, makes itself known

with dull blooms of rifle fire as the occupants try to blast their way through the semiopaque walls.

In answer to the unspoken question, *Could this get worse?* a mechanical grunting cries down from the workshop roof.

Is the sky actually falling?

The ceiling separates like angry clouds, flooding the chamber with white light, throwing the ship's dull contours into sharp relief. It's almost otherworldly, as if the sky itself were beaming down on the ship and its crew.

"Under the ship. Everyone. Now," commands Herakles as the edges of the retracting ceiling platforms sharpen with rifles.

As the soldiers from above open fire, Atalanta scoops up the fawn and the whole crew gathers beneath the ship.

"*Bdelyròs*," swears the doctor.

"*Bdelyròs* indeed, doctor," says Kalais. "Someone must've been followed."

"I only see one way out of this," says Herakles, her focus split between the crew, inputting some sort of track-pad password into a console hidden in a ship-leg hatch, and the blooms of gunfire behind the cube-lift platform. "Well, two, but the first is death. Chief?" She turns to Gus. "Is the ship ready?" She rethinks her phrasing. "Is it ready enough?"

The entire crew looks to Gus as the crunch of breaking ice-glass pinballs in echoes around the chamber. Blooms of gunfire grow closer through the cube-lift layers.

"Chief?" Herakles raises her voice above the fracas.

Gus closes her eyes and tugs at her sleeves to concentrate. Jasyn imagines her mentally walking the corridors of her cargo ship, assessing all the ways its condition might lead to their demise. When she opens her eyes, Jasyn hopes for confidence, but the answer is honest:

"I guess there's one way to find out."

ALL ABOARD

The ship's underbelly ramp lowers.

"Lynk, Tiphys, get to the main deck," commands Herakles. (Two "Aye, Captain's" follow.) "And Kal, get those engines turning."

Kalais nods. "Aye, Captain." From what little Jasyn knows of her, she's surprised there's no resistance.

"Zee, Cas, you're with me," commands Herakles. "Everyone else, stay under the ship, grab supplies and get them aboard."

Herakles leads the way in commandeering a sizeable chunk of scrap metal as an above-head shield. With Zetes and Castor, she braves the line of fire. Laser lines criss-cross, seeking their moving target. With each bullet strike, dents *ping* into the metal.

The crew follow their captain's lead.

Gus and Doctor Orpheus pair up. Pollux and Hylas, too. Each lugging the under-ship crates up the ramp, into the cargo hold.

Before Tiphys disappears onto the ship, Atalanta bundles the fawn into his arms and she and Jasyn team up to accept the crates ferried to them by Zetes and Castor, dropping them at the base of the platform for the next duo to collect.

"This doesn't feel like a safe way forward," mutters Peleus, rooted to the spot.

“You’re welcome to stay behind and discover the alternative,” says Herakles, her strong arms keeping the shield in place as Zetes and Castor lug the crates.

The more the ceiling platform opens, the deeper the rifles’ angle of attack, the further under the ship the crew has to retreat to be safe.

Silhouettes of soldiers behind the cube-lift platform take shape with each pulse of light from their weapons. The cracking surface suggests they’re only a couple of layers away from breach.

“Everyone aboard. Now,” Herakles instructs, even though some crates remain.

The crew and new recruits obey.

The dank cargo hold smells of rust and tastes like a bitten tongue.

With one final visual sweep of the workshop, Herakles declares “All in,” and Gus strikes a button. Pistons hiss, hauling the ramp upward.

The gap is enough to witness the not-so-distant cube-lift gateway splinter to pieces, broken by bullet strike, and the half-dozen soldiers stalking in, weapons first. Laser lines find their way between hull and hatch, clipping with sparks against internal surfaces.

Bullets miss the crew by luck rather than design.

As the pistons sigh relief, Gus cranks a couple of handles and announces: “Locks engaged.”

“Pollux, Gus, Orpheus, to your stations,” Herakles orders.

Three “Aye, Captain’s” follow. The selected crew continue into the ship at pace.

“Ship, it’s time to wake up,” says Herakles, and the ship responds by hissing into reluctant, illuminating action, groaning like a creature waking from hibernation.

“Hylas, you three,” says Herakles, turning to the new recruits. Nice to know their names are forgettable, or

irrelevant. “Get these crates secure, then yourselves up to main deck and buckle up.”

“Aye, Captain,” says Hylas as the rest of them nod.

“I can’t hear you,” says Herakles as she strides towards the airlock tunnel adjoining the hold and ship.

“Yes, Captain,” say Jasyn and Peleus.

Herakles’s focus lingers on Atalanta and Jasyn is about to explain why she isn’t saying it, but the captain’s eyes are almost apologetic, and it’s irrelevant now anyway as she’s already thrown herself along the corridor.

Following Hylas’s lead and with a dose of common sense, the three of them manoeuvre the new crates into position and get them anchored. The netting is thin, surely not sturdy enough, but Tiphys had said something about the cargo nets being light as a feather and strong as an ox. Turns out Gus wasn’t joking about the cobwebs; spider silk tangles about Jasyn’s fingertips.

Once all the crates are in place, Hylas gestures for them to follow him. Glad to put distance between themselves and the dull *thunk-thunk-ping* of bullets denting the hull, they bound through the airlock tunnel, locking it behind them, and striding into the main ship.

From there, they double-step up the spiral staircase at the ship’s centre. The metal of the rail bites cold against Jasyn’s palm. Footsteps *clink* above them on the mesh metal, too far ahead and between too many layers to decipher who is where.

Along one corridor, blips of blue light surround what must be the engine room hatch.

“Follow the purple stars,” says Hylas, signing the words, too.

Atalanta’s jaw practically falls off. Jasyn’s, too.

“You speak my language,” she signs, but Hylas is too busy looking where he’s going to catch her words.

With the walls of the spiral staircase, and the surface of each corridor they pass, blipping coloured lights, it’s as though

they're climbing an upward tunnel of stars. Constellations of different colours overlap, branching off at each corridor. Blue twinkles concentrate in one corridor, red in the next.

"Hey. You lot," calls Doctor Orpheus from halfway along a green-star corridor. "Hylas, I need them."

Hylas nods and gestures for them to go ahead. Stars of green lead to a doorway, which is itself a sickly green. From the stretchers buckled to the wall, the monitors, and an unsettling chamber marked QUARANTINE, these must be the medical quarters.

Though that doesn't explain the piano occupying one corner. Or perhaps it does, given the doctor's mysterious 'Medician' status. Jasyn has so many questions.

Monitors resembling chunky ice-screens occupy one wall. Each displays a wiggling line, a spiking line and a jumble of numbers.

"You two. Give me your left wrists." Doctor Orpheus tells Jasyn and Atalanta.

With an exchanged glance of uncertainty, and the barked encouragement that "You want to stay alive, get used to obeying orders," Jasyn and Atalanta do as they're told, and are rewarded with a metal cuff clamping about each of them.

A blue line, not unlike citizen Permits, illuminates the length of the cuffs. Two new monitors crackle into action, complete with rippling lines and numbers that must be their vital statistics.

"You said death has after-effects..." asks Jasyn. "Is it real? Seeing things. Is it real? Are *they* real?"

Doctor Orpheus grimaces at her. "Does it matter?"

Of course it matters. If her father's words are truth, that her mother isn't there with him and Snowdrop, then that might mean she's alive, searching for her *just as she's about to exit the planet, or worse.*

"All crew prepare for take-off," orders Herakles over the comms.

“We don’t have time for this,” says the doctor, practically pushing Jasyn away. “You,” she points to Peleus. “Wrist. Now.”

Peleus holds out his wrist and the doctor scans it, causing another monitor to illuminate. All their heartbeats are spiking. Given their current situation, it’s hardly surprising.

Doctor Orpheus nods them away.

“Get to the top deck. Make sure you’re secured. This next bit is going to be... bracing.”

Hylas picks up the pace. Purple and yellow blips join them as they continue their upward journey. Yellow lights lead to a room with a long table and benches. Without lights, its details are difficult to decipher. It could be the galley. Hopefully, they’ll all live long enough to find out.

Making their way higher up the ship tower, the *clinking* of bullets clipping the ship’s exterior from above grows louder.

Ahead of them, Gus clutches an ice-tablet. Her voice is elevated.

“...if you can hear me. They know about the ship. Do what we talked about. Get out, now.” The screen flickers, disrupting the image of Idmon and distorting the sounds.

As they get closer still, the screen goes blank.

Gus barely looks at them as she swipes away tears. “This way,” she tells them.

Climbing the purple star-studded stairway to the top, it opens out to the top deck and the reinforced-glass canopy at the ship’s pointed apex, framing the hail of bullets chipping into the glass.

Gus takes her place at the ship’s diagnostics terminal, scanning and manipulating blueprints. From the pulsing contours on the diagrams, the warnings of ALERT, and the alarms blaring, several aspects of the ship are in need of attention. Swiping her palm over the monitor, the alerts disappear.

“Diagnostics check – cancelled.” The ship’s voice seems to come from everywhere and nowhere all at once.

The issues seem to have been silenced rather than resolved.

“Choose a seat. Buckle up,” instructs Herakles from her place at the helm console.

Hylas nods them towards the row of seats where Tiphys is already belted in, the fawn tethered to the seat next to him. Nibbling at his own foot, the fawn looks calmer than Jasyn feels.

“Can the bullets break the glass?” she asks no one in particular as each bullet chips away at her sanity.

“Bullets can’t break it,” says Tiphys. “They can weaken it. It’s air resistance on take-off that might break it.” He gulps, upsetting even himself with his knowledge.

“Isn’t there something more useful we can do?” asks Jasyn.

“I always find it’s best to leave flying a sky ship to the professionals,” says Hylas, signing alongside, before demonstrating how the buckles work.

Jasyn pulls her own belt buckle a little too tight.

“How are you so calm?” she asks Hylas.

“How... How do you know my language?” Atalanta signs, stumbling on her own words.

“This isn’t my first rain of bullets,” he says. “And I’ve travelled.”

Atalanta’s face is a mix of curiosity and suspicion, but the storm of bullets distracts her.

“Chief. Status report,” announces Herakles to the whole deck.

“Airlocks all closed. No detectable breach.” Gus hesitates a little. “Diagnostics over-ruled.”

Herakles nods but gives nothing away.

“Engine room. Update.” Her words call up the moving images of the engine room on the helm terminal’s ice-screen, offering crystalline hi-definition of the sweat dripping down the necks of Kalais and Zetes as they shovel lumps of fuel-ice into the furnace hatch.

A harness affixes the shovel to Kalais’s right arm. Astro-technician muscles piston in a practiced and unflinching rhythm as the belly of the ship’s dark dankness is offset by the roaring blue engine glow.

“Climbing,” says Kalais, without breaking their stride, as Zetes adjusts what must be gauges and outlets.

“Confirmed,” says Castor, on the other side of the helm terminal where she and Pollux work the monitors, looking to Herakles as if she were their conductor.

“Lynk. All set up?” asks Herakles as Lynk finishes hooking up her visual apparatus to the ship’s terminal.

A monstrous figure takes shape atop the table-screen, formed in three dimensions by some sort of magnetised dust. The result is the fluctuating shape of a human-sized vole-rat, with analytical data – equations of its chemical composition, that its distance is twenty metres away, that it is “LIFE FORM: MAMMAL – effervescing across it.

Twenty metres away, in the entrance to the deck, a normal sized vole-rat squeaks and scurries away, startled by the sight of its giant self.

Gus wasn’t kidding about the rodents, either.

Lynk looks up through the glass apex at the swarm of soldiers, locking onto one in particular. The ‘dust’ takes formation, swirling to the shape of a rifle-wielding guard aiming downwards, but the image fluctuates, as if Lynk’s goggle-tech can’t quite lock on to the source.

“Needs some adjustment,” says Lynk. “Get me something proper to look at.”

“Pressure reached. Ready for launch,” announces the ship.

Everything vibrates, like a kettle about to boil. Metal creaks and screeches have Jasyn thinking of mythical monsters and mayhem. Scaffolding scrapes the exterior and the question of how many repairs were needed prior to take-off orbits at speed within the echo-chamber of her mind.

At the helm, Herakles readies the steering terminal with a series of shaped swipes across the lock-pad.

“Let’s open up.” At her command, up beyond the guards, the Athena Enterprises warehouse roof slots into itself, folding to frame the view and exit out to the tangle of weather troubling the skies.

Clumps of ice *clunk* against the ship’s apex as hail joins bullets, pummelling the ship.

Lynk trains her vision on the skies, conjuring a three-dimensional depiction of chaos, along with a similarly chaotic stream of analytical data.

“A weather front’s moved in. *Obviously*,” she says. “The skies are a mess. Captain, ordinarily I’d advise against flying in this...”

“It’s daybreak. The hail should be over by now,” says Herakles, scowling.

“Is this you, ice-monger?” Pollux’s words punch at Jasyn.

There’s a nervous buzz beneath Jasyn’s skin, adrenaline pulsing through her veins, fear of imminent death jabbing at her insides. Her stress has been known to create unpredictable weather patterns and unwelcome atmospheres, but this is different. She can feel it. Or, rather, she can’t feel it. There’s no ice in her veins. No crystal prickling her from within. She might be guilty of other weather fronts, but this time she can say with confidence:

“This isn’t me.”

CLEAR SKIES

Doctor Orpheus arrives at the top of the spiral stairs, brandishing a syringe, greeting Jasyn from afar with the sort of smile only medics and morticians can manage.

Hail. Herakles must have summoned her.

“Your heart rate is elevated,” says Doctor Orpheus, drawing closer.

“Isn’t everyone’s?” argues Jasyn, unbuckling and backing away.

“You’re the only one who can cause a storm,” says the doctor, without taking her eyes off her. “This is a sedative. It’ll wear off once we’re out of orbit.”

Bullets pelt the apex. White chips within the glass crackle into a web.

“The ship can’t take much more of this,” says Gus, perhaps a little redundantly.

“Anchor up,” orders Herakles.

Castor and Pollux press a series of buttons and switches. Ship trembling, it shrugs away its scaffolding with the kind of roar only metal and ancient beasts can muster.

The entire crew bristles.

“Tiphys, I hope you’ve brought the map,” says Herakles. *Is now really the time for humour?*

After a moment of instinctive panic and digging at his collar to find the sky-map token attached to him as always, Tiphys sighs relief.

Jasyn returns her focus to the doctor circling her like she's a circus creature in need of a muzzle.

Clangs of ice-lumps hurtle through the open warehouse roof. Bullets clip the ship's exterior, punctuating the escalating assault.

"Orpheus," Herakles warns.

"This isn't me," says Jasyn. "I'm not doing this."

Castor breaks from her console and anchors Jasyn's arms at her side, holding her in place. Jasyn struggles against her, but her captor has arena athleticism on her side.

Atalanta unbuckles and launches towards Castor, only to be snatched from her trajectory, kicking, flailing, raging, by the overbearing strength of their captain. Fighting free of Herakles's grip is no more possible than surviving this launch.

"The Ice King's guards are here," signs Atalanta, despite the captain's restraint. Jasyn translates. "Don't you think it more likely he knows about our voyage and it's him? *The Ice King is angry.*"

The ship shunts, sending them spluttering up past the bullet-spraying military. Out of necessity, Herakles lets Atalanta loose and grabs the helm console, guiding the launching ship as it fights gravity and travels up through the warehouse, through the parted roof and into the ice-plagued sky as ropes of ice lash the ship.

Clunking, creaking, groaning, crying.

The apex glass cracks.

New alarms flare and blare. A soundtrack to imminent death.

Atalanta lunges for the doctor, but she's too late. The needle pierces Jasyn's skin.

But before it can deliver its sedative, Jasyn's palms blaze, ice burning through the layers of her captor's sleeve. With a yelp, Castor retreats, throwing her aside.

Jasyn snatches the syringe from her arm and casts it across the deck, just as a shard of apex glass drops to the helm. Cracked webs sprawl outwards from the epicentre. A constellation etched in chaos.

On instinct, Jasyn launches to the base of the splitting window, her palm to the surface. Without thinking about it, as if her body knows the consequences, the air beneath her palm thickens to ice.

Layer upon layer of clear ice, smooth and undulating, plugs the cracks and gaps in the deconstructing material. Where there's nothing, now there's ice. Where there's glass, ice reinforces.

"Leave them be." Herakles splits her attention between steering the ship skyward, the unintentional gladiator arena of the top deck, and Jasyn's icy addition holding the ship together. "Back to your station, Castor. Orpheus, buckle in."

They do as instructed.

As if conjuring the ice has turned her to liquid, Jasyn's legs give out. Her every cell vibrates. Her every synapse alive with the tension on deck and the fluctuating air pressure beyond the apex. The reinforced glass holds strong, chunks of ice storming to test it.

The ship shudders and roars.

"You can solve this," Atalanta signs, skidding to kneel beside her and gesturing to the chaos beyond the ship.

If Jasyn's task were to sculpt the ice, to freeze the air's moisture at her touch, she could at least think about the motions she goes through. But she's never tried to combat a weather front created by another.

"Remember our village," signs Atalanta.

Obliterated.

The floodgates of strangling thoughts open. She will never see her parents again, not *really*. This world is so barren and desperate, the only plentiful sustenance is *other people*. She imagines the sharp silhouette of the Ice King in his palace, watching his storm tear their ship apart. His imagined laughter stabs through her, blooming sharp within her chest.

An invisible force pins her into the floor as if trying to push her through it.

“The pressure’s climbing...” notes Herakles, the warning in her voice underscoring the screams and rattles of a ship about to fall apart.

Jasyn fears she might, too.

The cries of ice scraping the hull grow louder.

Atalanta tucks fallen hair behind Jasyn’s ear, inviting her full attention. Jasyn expects fear in her eyes, but she finds only a smile and a sense of calm.

“Remember how we roamed the woods together?” Atalanta signs. “How we played hide and seek, or chase? And sometimes I’d let you win?”

The howling of wind resistance and the *clunking* of ice against metal become distant as Jasyn allows the memories to wash over her.

“Remember how you always turned away a second too late when you saw me in the lagoon?” *If only Jasyn’s heated cheeks could melt the hail.* “Remember when you showed me how you felt? And when you discovered I felt the same?”

That kiss. The snow-globe of emotion. The blazing filament fruits. Atalanta’s lips on hers. The firepit of Jasyn’s memories warm her.

If they’re all about to die, these are the memories Jasyn would happily be lost in forever. That Atalanta is making their last moments happy ones is nudged aside by the thought that her intention might be something else entirely... because, as Jasyn’s fingers thread between Atalanta’s, as her heart roars with the strength of an ice-engine, all her vibrating atoms fall into alignment and everything is tranquil.

Calm ripples across the skies.

Curtains of ice part, allowing a safe channel through the chaos.

How might the people of Iolcus react to the sight of a ship piercing the sky? She imagines citizens woken early, peering up from the city tangle, or from their high-rises, to take in the spectacle of the renegade ship slicing through the clouds.

Lynk swipes the side of her goggles, throwing the data across the deck: an endless, streaming projection. The 'dust' flexes and undulates, flowing together in waves.

"Clear skies ahead," she determines with an undercurrent of disbelief, as beyond the slackened ropes of storm, diamond stars glisten.

Collective worry is replaced by gasping awe.

"Is this you, ice-monger?" asks Herakles with a glint in her eyes that suggests she might even be impressed.

Castor rubs her ice-burned forearm, but even she and Doctor Orpheus stare at the magic and mystery of the skies.

Framed by the ship's apex, the dangerous beauty of the unknown ripples light and dark. The astronauts applaud their successful leap through the upper atmosphere.

Everything is weightless.

Untethered, Jasyn and Atalanta drift.

Jasyn reaches out as if to touch the shimmering sea of stars. Which amongst them is the eye of the mountain bear, watching over them? The Astro-pyxis. The Sky Compass. The star that guides them.

Laughter of joy, disbelief, fear, elation, hope, echoes through the corridors of the [C]ARGO ship. "Gravity adjusted," announces the ship, shunting forward and dropping Jasyn and Atalanta to the deck. It takes only a moment to recover, and a moment further for Atalanta to smile, a glint of mischief in her galactic eyes as she signs:

"Remember how you wanted adventure?"

END BOOK I.

The adventure continues in...

JASYN AND THE ASTRONAUTS

II.

THE SEA OF STARS

But before you sail on to the next adventure...

SIGN UP FOR FREE STUFF AND UPDATES!

If you'd like to hear more about my writing adventures (behind-the-scenes insights, new release announcements, special offers, and bonus materials) and would like a **free e-book of *Theseus and The Sky Labyrinth***, once it's released (due 2024):

[SIGN UP HERE](#)



Set in the same universe as *Jasyn and The Astronauts*, *Theseus and the Sky Labyrinth* is a sapphic, swords & sorcery reimagining of the myth of Theseus, Ariadne, and the Minotaur.

Join Theseus as she explores the Sky Labyrinth — an architectural wonder, a prison, a death trap — on the hunt for the minotaur. In the maze of masks and monsters, can she be the hero Princess Ariadne needs her to be?

REVIEWS WELCOME!



Hello! Gwenhyver here. I hope you enjoyed *Under the Ice Skies*, the start of Jasyn and Atalanta's adventure together and their mission to save a world or two!

I'd really appreciate it if you'd leave a review wherever you bought the book. This is my first book, and the first in the series, so reviews will encourage others to take a chance on me and the Jasyn universe. Your review doesn't have to be long, or a literary masterpiece, just some spoiler-free thoughts about your experience.

Thank you!

ALSO BY GWENHYVER

JASYN

AND THE

ASTRONAUTS

THE SERIES

Discover more *Jasyn and The Astronauts* books:

Book 2 - *The Sea of Stars*

(Due November 2023)

Book 3 - *Two Faced Planet*

(Due 2024)

Book 4 - *The Ice Princess*

(Due 2024)

Book 5 - *The Sky Circus*

(Due TBD)

For updates on these books, the series beyond, and more, [sign up to my mailing list](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gwenhyver writes stories with fantastical elements and queer characters. Or is that fantastical characters and queer elements...? She lives in a village on Dartmoor, England, with her wonderful wife. When she's not happily hermit-ing in her writing den, she's likely roaming the moors or exploring cycle trails wearing too much hiviis. *Jasyn and the Astronauts* is her debut novel series.

www.gwenhyver.com



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First of all, thank you to *you* for reading this book. There are so many books out there, I am thrilled and grateful that you've taken a chance on me and Jasyn and her skyward adventure.

Thank you to Jen, my Super Spouse, who read too many versions of the manuscript. Jen's powers include enthusiasm, general awesomeness, and being a sounding board with exceptionally helpful opinions. Thank you for spending so many evenings and weekends hermit-ing together in the den or on the sofa. I couldn't ask for a more supportive partner and best friend. This book wouldn't have happened without you. Thank you for trudging through the word mud with me!

Kit Mallory – sorry (not sorry) to embarrass you and mention how awesome you are... Not only are you an exceptional friend, you have so much writing knowledge it's a bit showy-offy to be honest :-). Your feedback and edits of book one have been the most educational writing experience. Thank you for letting me osmose your writerly know-how. (Though I'm sure I'll keep throwing in redundant commas, still,)

To my friends and family who have been supportive of my writerly aspirations. Thank you to Rich for being the best sibling (apart from me) and listening to me prattle on about book stuff!

To my writer's group – thank you for cheering me on from the side-lines all these years. It's been so fun seeing everyone's ideas take shape in our various different projects.

Thanks to Arts Council England for funding my 'Develop Your Creative Practice' application. ACE funding afforded me the time to focus on learning how to write in a series. For their support, I will always be grateful.

Cover artist extraordinaire, Alyssa Winans. I am so thrilled to have been able to work with you. Not only are you unquestionably talented, you're a dream to work with and have created the prettiest covers in all the land. Thank you!

Jane Adams via The Literary Consultancy – thank you for your astute critique of my manuscript. You nudged me in the direction of some crucial 'aha!' moments.

Amanda Rutter, thank you for your copy edit, hunting down all those rogue ugly speech marks.

And an extra thanks to you, the reader, for *even reading the acknowledgments*. I've mentioned you twice now, so you could argue this is mostly about you! If I had to quantify my gratitude I'd say it's larger than all the galaxies of the Seven Suns... But I don't want to overstate it and scare you off... I hope you join Jasyn on the next leg of her journey!

JASYN AND THE ASTRONAUTS

Book 1: Under The Ice Skies

First edition August 2023

Published by Sky Dog Books

Copyright © 2023 Gwenhyver

ISBN (eBook): 978-1-916644-00-7

ISBN (Print): 978-1-916644-01-4

Cover design by [Alyssa Winans](#)

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author, except by a reviewer who may quote short passages in a review. For permissions, contact: [author@
gwenhyver.com](mailto:author@gwenhyver.com).

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Story inspired by the myth of Jason and The Golden Fleece.